



Resources

Lessons Learned

Effective Meeting Facilitation: The *Sine Qua Non* of Planning

by **Miranda Duncan**

[NOTE: Miranda Duncan's following article is the longest in our Toolkit. It is so rich with useful information, however, that I could not bear to shorten it! Instead, I have moved her excellent list of sample **TOOLS, FORMS AND CHECKLISTS** to a separate chapter directly following this one. -- Morrie Warshawski, Editor]

INTRODUCTION

Say the word "meeting" and expect to hear sighs, groans, or sarcastic remarks. Yet, planning requires people to come together frequently over a period of time in a word meeting. Well-planned and facilitated meetings sustain participants' energy and allow them to contribute their best thinking to the planning endeavor.

The planning process is like a slide show that follows a logical sequence from beginning to end. Each slide represents a single meeting. The whole of the planning process will be greater than the aggregate of each meeting, but only if each meeting is orchestrated to accomplish the requisite function. Like each individual slide, the composition of a meeting is designed to convey a message or fulfill a purpose.

A large part of the planning process is accomplished in meetings because, as the saying goes, "Two heads are better than one." Each member of the planning team brings an essential perspective to the process. Elements of a plan goals or solutions to problems are not the only outcome of planning meetings. The interactive work transpiring to develop the plan is as important - if not more important - than the plan itself. Think of a time you recounted a funny story, but no one laughed. Then, you realize, "Well, I guess you had to be there to appreciate it." That's the way it is with planning: Those who must carry out the plan with energy and enthusiasm, must be there to help create the plan.

The information in this chapter is presented primarily for the person who will be responsible for pulling those meetings together, leading them, and coordinating tasks in preparation for meetings and the follow-up steps in their wake. Topics cover the items on a facilitator's check list.

- Identify the purpose, or expected outcome, of the meeting.
- Make sure the right people will be there.
- Develop the agenda.
- Prepare necessary materials.
- Double check the room set up.
- Lead the meeting as a facilitator
- Agree on ground rules
- Practice facilitation skills
- Use consensus-building decision making techniques
- Be prepared to handle conflict as it surfaces
- Clarify "next steps" and assignments
- Reflect on effectiveness of the meeting (evaluation)

I. THINK BEFORE YOU MEET

It is not unusual to spend as much time planning a meeting as running it. Preparation begins with asking these questions:

1. *What outcome do we want to achieve by the end of this particular meeting?*

A newspaper editorial from an irate father just after attending his daughter's college orientation session serves to illustrate the usefulness of understanding the various reasons for meetings. This man went to the meeting to learn about courses of study, relevant deadlines, tuition and expenses, financial aide, and safety precautions. "I knew I was in trouble," he said, "when I entered a room full of chairs set up in a circle." The meeting was designed, instead, to explore feelings about one's child going off to college, and to build relationships with other parents.

Whether you identify with the father who sought specific information and was sorely disappointed, or the meeting planners who offered an opportunity for consciousness raising - the point is that the purpose of the meeting must be clearly identified. The purpose drives who should attend, the agenda items, what materials or equipment to have on hand, and the direction of the next meeting.

Knowing that the purpose of the meeting is "planning" is not enough. More specifically, people meet for one of, or for a combination of these reasons:

- Information exchange (acquiring or disseminating information or both)
 - Self-awareness or consciousness raising
 - Learning (topics and skills)
 - Creative thinking and generating ideas (brainstorming)
 - Critical thinking (analysis, goal setting, problem solving, decisionmaking)
 - Accomplishing tasks
 - Building relationships and commitment
2. *To achieve the desired meeting outcome, what must we do during the meeting? And how much time will each item realistically require?*

Knowing the purpose of the meeting is a first step in structuring the agenda. Having a firm idea of where you want to be by the end of the meeting suggests what must be covered during the meeting. Do we need to review last year's budget? Do we want to create a common vision of our organization in the year 2020? If we want consensus on four short-term goals, how can we both inspire creative thinking yet maintain a sense of reality?

Each step in reaching the desired meeting outcome is thought through carefully to determine the amount of time needed.

- Establish how long the meeting is to last
- List the agenda items that need to be covered or process steps that need to occur
- Estimate how long each item will take factoring in time for dialogue
- Leave about 15 minutes minimum at the end for summary and agreement on what comes next.

If, after following the above exercise, the agenda clearly requires more time, revise accordingly. Adjust the length of the meeting (and let participants

know), or cut back on what you expect to accomplish. Keep in mind that critical thinking requires more time than typically allowed for in meetings, especially if there is controversy. Opportunities to voice an opinion, ask questions, and explain reasons behind positions are key to developing and achieving consensus on a plan. Shortcuts at this point could cause looping back or gridlock farther down the line.

3. *What idea-building processes would be useful?*

Planning alternates between expanding and culling ideas. Visioning and brainstorming help participants expand their thinking. Ranking, cost-benefit analysis, and comparing related concepts help participants winnow their thinking. When critical issues must be addressed, participants might use a problem solving process, or "force field analysis." Without a sequential structure to guide thinking and dialogue, participants become bogged down or overwhelmed. Using a rational framework guides and clarifies the participants' thought process. (See attached explanations of a variety of such processes.)

4. *Who needs to attend the planning meetings?*

As a general rule, planning can be accomplished by a sub-group within an organization not everyone has to participate. Ideally, the planning group will be comprised of at least one person from each unit or each level of organizational work (i.e., staff, board, volunteer). In addition to representative participation, the planning group should have someone with authority to make decisions, someone who has responsibility for carrying out decisions, someone who knows the milieu backwards and forwards (subject matter expertise), and input from someone who uses or benefits from the service or product the organization offers.

In addition to diversity of experience, planning teams should encompass diversity of thinking styles. The world sometimes seems to be sharply divided into two types of people big picture visionaries, and practical nuts-and-bolts people. Planning teams require both types. The big picture folks have difficulty reaching closure and won't be able to convert a vision to an action plan. Developing step-by-step procedures is what the nuts-and-bolts types like doing best.

The planning group, at some point along the way, will need to perform tasks best left to individuals i.e., one person is generally charged with a writing project. Allowing two or three individuals to take information from the group, work out an idea on paper, and bring it back to the group for feedback saves meeting time. For example, when a complex issue surfaces, a subgroup may want to meet, and bring back their recommendations to the whole planning group or organization.

The planning group might decide to elicit public participation for a specific aspect of the planning process. There are a variety of meeting formats to enhance information exchange with the public: focus groups, charettes, open house, workshops. A "talking head" format is the least effective. Make the information flow as interactive as possible.

Occasionally, either because the organization is small, or because trust has disintegrated, all members of the organization may need to take part in the planning process. The answer to the question, "Why are we meeting?" should help determine who needs to be there. No one who needs to be at a meeting should be left out, and no one should have to attend an unnecessary meeting.

5. *What should we send participants in advance? And, what information should we have available at the meeting (i.e., maps, flow charts, the old report, proposals, etc.)?*

Sending out an agenda before the meeting allows participants to ask questions about it, prepare if necessary, and in general sets a businesslike tone. If participants are going to be asked to read or edit documents, send the material in advance. (Even when material has been sent ahead, time for review at the meeting might be wise.)

Visual aids assist in making visionary dialogue more concrete. If the planning committee must consider capital improvements to a building, obtain floor plans or blueprints. If planning focuses on publicity for the annual arts festival, make sure participants have calendars. Use worksheets to develop action plans so participants can think in terms of implementing creative ideas (see attached "Action Planning Worksheet").

6. *What's the best way to set up the space?*

The ideal planning group ranges from 6 to 12 members. Most rooms will allow a group of 12 to meet around a table. For a larger group up to 24 tables placed in a U-shape work well. If planning requires participation of a very large group or public input, a face-to-face arrangement may be difficult. At the least, participants should have easy visual and spatial access to speakers, facilitators, or the area of the room where most focus is directed. If the large group will need to separate into smaller groups, try to have separate "pods" of seating already set up so participants can move to their work-group areas without having to rearrange the furniture.

7. *What equipment will make the meeting run more smoothly?*

The flip chart is standard equipment in planning meetings. Make sure there is wall space nearby for posting the chart paper as the meeting progresses. (In other words, flipping the paper over does not provide participants the benefit of having their work product spread out on the walls before them.)

For larger groups, overhead projectors work better than flip charts, but only for presenting information. The group's work product should be recorded on flip chart paper and posted, even if not easily visible by all participants. At least the information is readily available to refer to or review before leaving the meeting.

Computers that project text onto the wall can be very useful when the group is developing a carefully worded document such as a mission statement.

Innovative ways of presenting information enhances participants' attention and inspires creativity. Facilitators, for instance, might employ videotapes to illustrate success stories or skill methodologies. Visual aids, in the final analysis, however, do not substitute for participants rolling up their sleeves and getting to work.

It is hard to imagine a reason to tape record a planning meeting. Taping can be intimidating and stifle creative thinking. Generally tape recording is used when there is a low trust level and someone anticipates a law suit.

A word about food at meetings: Light refreshments, especially coffee or other

beverages can help sustain energy levels. If the meeting is planned for the evening, serving a light meal first allows more control in starting on time. In some organizations, food is an enticement to attend the meeting.

II. ORCHESTRATING THE MEETING

Leadership. In the olden days, meetings were run by chairmen. Bringing in an independent facilitator, or appointing someone to that role is becoming standard planning practice. There is a danger, however, as "facilitation" moves into vogue: It looks easy, but the appearance of ease may be deceptive. The word "facilitation" means to make something easier, so while others look on and think the facilitator has an easy job, the facilitator is working very hard to make it look easy. Behind the scenes, the facilitator has taken training courses, practiced, taken more training, learned the hard way from experience, and puts great effort into his or her work.

The ideal arrangement is for the chairperson and a facilitator to work closely in planning and leading the meeting. The chairperson retains the prestige and authority of leader, and provides grounding in reality. The facilitator has process expertise, serves to balance participation, and is better situated to move the group through sensitive issues, controversy, and tough problems. Sometimes groups further divide functions and ask someone other than the facilitator to record meeting notes on a flip chart. Many facilitators use the flip chart as a tool in leading (and controlling) the meeting.

Separating the titular leadership role from the meeting leadership function benefits the planning process in three ways.

1. By taking care of process concerns, the facilitator frees the chairperson to contribute valuable input as a meeting participant.
2. The facilitator must operate on principles of objectivity. Participation is evened-out and decisions reflect joint thinking. Ideas of the more forceful participants are tempered by the facilitator's probing questions, and if those ideas are adopted, it is because others view them as worthy.
3. The facilitator brings an understanding of group process and decisionmaking so that he or she can interject steps and techniques (such as those described in the attachments) to move the group through complex information and controversial positions.

Frequently a member of the planning team must assume leadership of a meeting. On those occasions, the internal leader can serve the group well, just as the external facilitator does, by adopting the following operating objectives:

- Help the group improve the way it solves problems and makes decisions
- Ensure that the group accomplishes its identified outcomes in a timely manner
- Foster within the group an enhanced sense of commitment to one another and to the achievement of goals
- See that group members share and understand all information relevant to an issue, and seek new information when necessary
- Buffer the group from internal and/or external manipulation or coercion

Key Meeting Facilitation Skills. Effective meeting facilitation requires skill in three capacities:

(1) Analysis

- Separating content work from process work
- Identifying interests
- Framing problems

(2) Communication

- choice of words
- ability to listen, summarize and reframe
- using questions to stimulate thinking

(3) Familiarity with process models

- leadership
- decisionmaking and consensus building
- techniques to keep the meeting on track and moving

Analysis. A community leadership group received \$2,000 gift for youth programs from a wealthy individual. No one stepped forward to design and oversee a program. In the meeting to plan next year's activities, the gift was overlooked. Eventually the president asked what the group wanted to do with the funds. All sorts of suggestions poured forth, always with the same conclusion: The kids wouldn't come anyway. What the group needed to do was decide a process issue before launching into content. They needed to evaluate options of how to deal with the funds (not what program to implement). The choices were: (a) give it back; (b) give it to someone who would do something with it; (c) use up the funds on a one-time event for youth; or (d) implement the program as envisioned when the gift was made. After discussing the pros and cons of each option, the group agreed to implement a youth program. Until they decided that question, they could not focus or commit to any specific plan of action on the content. This story illustrates how a facilitator needs to separate the process issue, prompt the group to take care of that issue, and then move on to the goal or content issue.

The other useful analytic ability is to spot an underlying interest, and bring it out in the open so it can be discussed and negotiated. The president of the school board does not want to incorporate public participation into the district's strategic planning process, claiming it is unnecessary and a drain on time. His underlying interest, however, is that he does not want to be chastised for low student test scores. The facilitator must recognize the validity of the president's reluctance, yet push forward with the requirement: "How can we involve the citizens of the district without the meeting turning into a gripe and blame session?" Once structures were in place to prevent wholesale attack on individual board members, he was quite willing to involve the public.

Problems must be stated without imparting judgment or implying a solution. The problem statement has to be worded so that participants with differing viewpoints accept that description. For example, an arts organization holds a theme fair to raise funds for its operation. One of the planning committee members raises the concern that a vendor sells items that do not conform to the theme. Note the difference in how the dilemma is stated: "Should we let Henry sell his items next time?" Or, "How do we ensure items are congruent with the theme?" Or, "We're here to discuss

sexual harassment," vs. "We're here to agree upon appropriate conduct in the work place."

Communication skills. The facilitator primarily relies on listening and asking questions. Listening enables the facilitator to remember the content, relate the content to the discussion, capture its essence on the flip chart, note reactions of others to what is said, and make a judgment call about sticking with the topic or moving on to the next speaker or agenda item. By summarizing the speaker's point, or by recording the idea on the flip chart, the facilitator affirms to the speaker that he or she has been heard and understood.

Facilitators ask questions to control the process and to spark thinking. A question signals progress we are moving on with our agenda: "Shall we begin?" "What did you hope to walk away with by the end of the meeting?" Questions bring the discussion back on track: "Shall we add that topic to the agenda for next time?" "Do we need to make sure we cover the other items before we run out of time?" Or, "Do we need to decide this in order to decide that?" Questions can provide closure: "Is there anything else before we move on?" "What are our next steps?"

Questions also stimulate thinking, and rethinking. Statements can be perceived as, or actually are, challenges provoking a counter challenge or assertion of a superior idea. Questions, on the other hand, create a temporary vacuum a time for reflection. The facilitator, by posing questions, eliminates much of the superfluous posturing and banter. Questions maintain an air of openness, an attitude of, "Let me hear more before I decide." Examples: "If you do this, what will happen?" "Could you describe the process of communication you currently use?" "If you could change one thing about the design, what would it be?" In other words, questions, rather than directives or advice, are the most potent way to encourage the group to focus on something, rethink a course of action, or evaluate options.

"Reframing" combines skill in communication with an ability to analyze what's happening on the spot. Reframing is a way to "launder language." The facilitator extracts inflammatory or negative impact from a statement, and crystalizes the legitimate underlying motivation for that statement. For example, a board member emphatically states, "There's no use in going forward with this planning process. What we need is a new executive director!" The facilitator quickly reframes the remark to highlight a valid concern: "You want to make sure staff can carry out the board's policy directives." Reframing a statement so the language is palatable to others does carry the risk of the speaker admonishing the facilitator for not summarizing the statement accurately, as originally stated. If that happens, the facilitator would have to rework the wording more to the speaker's liking. On the other hand, the speaker may be relieved to see that there is a more constructive way to present the concern and feel affirmed that someone has taken the concern seriously.

Decisionmaking by vote. Traditionally, groups made decisions by voting, and allowed the "majority to rule." Voting makes sense when:

- Many people are involved
- The population is diverse
- Moving forward is more important than settlement
- Before votes are cast there is ample time for dialogue
- The dialogue includes looking at and evaluating a number of options

The disadvantage of voting is that it leads to an all or nothing, win/lose outcome. What happens to those who voted "nay" and were outnumbered? How committed are they to supporting the outcome? And, what happens to the concerns driving the no-vote. Were those concerns addressed, or will they come back to haunt the yea-

sayers? Ample discussion with analysis of alternative courses of action can counteract the disadvantages of voting. Even then, voting might be reserved as a last resort. Clearly, in a small group convened for the purpose of planning, consensus is possible and more desirable.

Decisionmaking by Consensus. Over the past 15 years, making decisions by consensus has gained acceptance, yet a number of misconceptions remain. Consensus is the cooperative development of a decision that is acceptable enough so that all members of the group agree to support the decision. Consensus means that each and every person involved in decisionmaking has veto power. Keep in mind, though, that members of the planning group are team members, not adversaries. Responsible team members use power only to achieve the best results vis a vis the group's purpose, not for their own personal gain. In other words, if a team member objects, it behooves the others to find out why and give considerable thought to the concerns expressed by the dissenting member.

The remarkable result of giving individuals veto power is that they rarely use it! If participants are reassured nothing can go forward without their approval, they tend to relax, contributing more to the content and worrying less about procedural matters.

Consensus does not mean there is an absence of conflict. It does mean there is a commitment of time and energy to work through the conflict. Consensus requires taking all concerns into consideration and attempting to find the most universal decision possible. Groups able to make decisions by consensus usually demonstrate:

- Unity of purpose, a basic agreement shared by all in the group regarding goals and purpose of the group
- Commitment to the group, a belief that the group needs have priority over individual needs
- Participation, ideally no formal hierarchy equal access to power and to some degree, the group's autonomy from external hierarchic structures
- Recognition that process is as important as outcome
- Underlying attitudes of cooperation, support, trust, respect, and good communication
- Understanding and tolerance of differences, acceptance of conflicting views
- TIME willingness and capability to devote time to the process

Factors working against consensus include: competition, individualism, passivity and solution-orientation

There are many techniques to facilitating consensus:

- Frame the dilemma so participants see the big picture and recognize their interdependence: "What decision do we need to make and why do we need to make it?"
- Remove insecurity and make sure all participants have the same key information and have the opportunity to discuss that information together.
- Build little agreements along the way: "So we agree that this is a good way to state the problem we are trying to solve." Or, "At least you do all agree that something has to be done, that things are unacceptable as they are now."
- Motivate creativity by asking "Isn't there anything else you can suggest?" and then allow for a long pregnant pause.
- Summarize and fractionate: "This is what we agree on, and this is still in question. What are the specific causes for concern?" Or, "How can we get the benefit from doing this, but not the detriment?"

- Refer to the mission and purpose of the group for guidance: "If we do this, are we in line with what we are all about?"
- Finally, ask: "What will happen if we can't all agree?" Or, "Do you really need to make a decision on this issue?"

Voting and consensus are the "how" of decisionmaking. Decisions, themselves, seem to come in three shapes:

- 1.
2. Some decisions have to be answered "yes" or "no." Either we close the theater for inclement weather, or we go on with the show. The outcomes are mutually exclusive and a choice is imperative for the good of the organization.
3. Other decisions require finding a solution to a problem. "How shall we solve for X?" "What shall we do about lack of attendance at our performances?" Or, reframing the problem in the affirmative: "How can we ensure record attendance?"
4. A third type of decision is even more open-ended. "Which way shall we go?" Or, "What goal shall we attain?"

Try out different ways of framing the decision using the above three formats. The way in which the decision is framed sets the stage for the solutions generated. Different framing of the same topical issue elicits very different solutions. For example, a decision regarding regulation of outdoor advertising can be framed, "Who is going to control outdoor advertising local municipalities or the state?" Responses will be very different from those prompted by the question: "How can local government determine the character of its land use without eliminating outdoor advertising?"

The important rule of thumb about good decisionmaking is "Do Not Decide Prematurely." Ultimately, the thinking process for any type of decision is the same:

- Gathering and analyzing relevant information
- Careful framing of the question you want answered
- Discussing values and criteria
- Envisioning various scenarios
- Evaluating consequences of those scenarios
- Making the decision
- Refining specific aspects of the decision and ensuring its implementation

III. OTHER TECHNIQUES TO MAKE MEETINGS MORE EFFECTIVE

Ground Rules. An essential task early on in planning meetings is for the group to agree on ground rules. Ground rules are logistical agreements a group makes to improve its ability to work as a group. They are the standards of operating that determine how people conduct their discussions and how they will make their decisions. The value of ground rules lies in their very creation. Any preordained rule such as, "We should respect each other" will garner minimal commitment. Only through dialogue will a rule achieve its maximum self-enforcing potential. The discussion can be initiated with the question: "What operating principles should we adopt in order to make our work more efficient and of higher quality?" Or, simply: "What are some important guidelines we should all keep in mind as we work together in these meetings?"

The discussion prompted by asking for ground rules not only elicits the rules; just as importantly, it allows potentially derailing sensitivities to surface. The facilitator can normalize strongly held values and emotional issues. The participants will feel better about themselves as group members and appreciate a greater sense of safety. Some

participants may discount the importance of establishing these guidelines up front. The facilitator must be prepared to assert the value of the discussion and negotiate for the participants' indulgence. If the group has polarized around issues, spending time on establishing ground rules becomes all the more important. Ground rules generally take the form of agreements on certain topics.

Typically ground rules center around these issues:

- The purpose of the planning meetings (what people expect to have at the end of the series of meetings)
- Significant or ambiguous definitions
- Time lines for meetings length of meetings, when they are held, and for how long
- Meeting leadership and other roles
- Participation and attendance
- How decisions will be made (consensus or voting)
- The value of expressing different perspectives how disagreements should be expressed and handled ("Discuss the undiscussable" or "How to disagree without being disagreeable")
- Communication with those outside the planning process

The facilitator can offer one or two ground rules to stimulate the participants' discussion. The facilitator can also suggest thinking about ground rules participants have overlooked. Agreement on a specific rule, however, must be made by the participants.

Flip Charts. Flip charts are an essential tool. The facilitator can use chart writing to:

- 1.
2. Create a record of the work product. Participants can see the notes and make corrections or ask for clarification as the conversation progresses.
3. Organize thinking i.e., draft wording, pose options, connect ideas, depict consequences, narrow choices, summarize decisions, organize tasks.
4. Keep the participants on track by referring to the topic on the flip chart, or specific agenda items.

The information on the flip chart must be "user friendly." Use large letters, space between concepts (so ideas can be added), alternating colors, and make sure the paper can be posted rather than just flipped over.

Bin Issues. A useful tool for moving participants through the agenda is to create a separate flip chart page for issues raised, important, but either tangential or too complex to deal with during the meeting. Noting these issues on a separate sheet, also referred to as the "parking lot," respects participants' concerns and assures them that the issues will be addressed. (Make sure they are addressed eventually, or that participants no longer want to address them; otherwise the bin issue sheet soon will lose its efficacy.)

Next Steps. The facilitator should have a good sense of what is going to happen in meeting #2 when planning meeting #1. That sense is confirmed by taking about 15 minutes at the end of the meeting to ask "Where do we go from here?" or, "What do you need to do so that you can move forward in this process?" There may be a number of tasks participants must accomplish before the next meeting convenes. Make sure to summarize who is going to do what, with whom, and by when. Rough-out major agenda items for the next meeting before adjourning.

When participants reach decisions, the facilitator will need to devote time to how

they will implement those decisions. Thinking they are done, euphoria sets in, and participants fail to convert the decision to an action plan (see action planning worksheet in the attachments). Before participants leave the meeting, the facilitator should pin down action steps: Who is responsible for taking what action by when?

Evaluation. Planning requires a willingness to look critically at how the group is performing. Honest reflection can be difficult. One way to help participants become more comfortable with self-critique in a work setting is to ask them to evaluate the meeting. "What aspect of the meeting did you particularly like? Any insights? What didn't go well? What would you do differently next time?" On a written evaluation, leave room for "suggestions." If participants offer their critique orally, the facilitator will need to encourage them to be critical, that the evaluation is an important part of the facilitator's learning and improvement. (See attachment.)

Handling conflict in a meeting. If meetings are well-planned and orchestrated, conflict is less likely to surface. If it does, it probably needs to. The most common reaction to conflict is avoidance. Repressing conflict, pretending it doesn't exist, hoping it will go away, or admonishing participants for disagreeing are all forms of avoidance. Generally the conflict does not disappear, and often times, the situation worsens.

The facilitator is in a good position to help participants engage in constructive conflict. Understanding the nature of conflict, its sources and patterns helps the facilitator remain centered when participants begin to develop oppositional stances on goals or strategies in the planning process.

Social scientists make a distinction between objective and subjective conflict. (See "**Sources of Conflict**" diagram in next chapter). The source of subjective conflict stems from poor relationships, personality clashes, and differences in values. This type of conflict is difficult to handle because values and preferences cannot be negotiated. Rather, participants agree implicitly or explicitly work around fundamental differences either because those differences do not interfere with getting the job done, or because getting the job done is more important than expending energy on fighting.

If relationship conflicts have been allowed to fester in an organization, members of that organization may not be able to work together as a planning team. The group may benefit from a team development program, sensitivity training, or application of Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicators to enhance their ability to interact constructively before embarking on a planning process. On the other hand, when participants come together frequently for a significant purpose and experience success on joint goals, often relationships improve. There is no litmus test to determine which of these two routes to follow. The choice may be best left to the participants themselves.

The source of objective conflict lies in the allocation of resources salaries, vacation time, office space, supplies, respect. Objective conflicts can be negotiated. The conflict is framed in the same way a problem would be framed, and the negotiations would resemble problem solving. What makes resolving conflict more difficult than solving a problem is the pervasiveness of strong emotions and lack of trust. The facilitator has to move more slowly, spending time talking with participants individually, finding out from each individual or faction what it would take to be able to work together productively again.

Here too, the planning process itself may provide the group with the opportunity to improve to rethink job descriptions, performance objectives, incentives, and working conditions. Or, the group may decide to put the planning on hold and focus on

settling a specific, exacerbated conflict first. When it appears addressing a specific conflict takes precedence over planning, there are a few principles to keep in mind:

- Allocate sufficient time
- Help the participants clarify what the conflict is about
- Do not take sides
- Affirm the validity of all viewpoints
- Frame the conflict in terms of a problem to be solved
- Create space for problem solving to occur
- Help participants save face
- Discuss what happens if no agreement is reached
- Ask if the group can proceed with what they do agree on and hold back on areas of disagreement
- Keep in mind that ultimately, the participants have the responsibility to resolve the conflict

The process to resolve conflict is similar to problem solving. The most important steps, especially when viewpoints have become polarized, are the first four (below). Frequently conflict does not get resolved because the participants begin at step five. The role of the facilitator is particularly valuable to ensure that the participants do start at step one.

- 1.
2. The facilitator gains rapport and commitment from the parties to address the conflict. (Side meetings with individuals or factions.)
3. Agreement on the scope of what you are trying to solve. "What do you need to agree on so that you can proceed with your organizational mission and goals?" This question may sound easy, yet generally requires more time than anticipated. (First time the participants meet on the conflict.)
4. Agreement on ground rules, including meeting protocols, time lines, the scope, who participates and the decision making process. (Second meeting.)
5. Gathering and exchanging information on the aspects of the scope from technical data to feelings in a joint session.
6. Framing the decision to be made incorporating diverse interests into the problem statement.
7. Developing criteria by which to evaluate a wise decision.
8. Developing options to address the problem statement.
9. Negotiating over the options.
10. Making decisions, fine tuning terms and implementation plan.
11. Checking back to see how things are going.

IV. IN CLOSING

Following a process structure for thinking and dialogue, sharpening facilitation skills such as listening, reframing, and asking searching questions, planning meetings ahead of time are the basics of meeting effectiveness. Two additional ingredients cannot come from a book (or a computer). The first is a mindset a mindset that believes in the wisdom of the participants, demonstrates patience and more patience, and conveys a nonjudgmental demeanor. In general, a good facilitator is supportive, respectful, and has enough extra energy to carry a group through late afternoon slump.

The second ingredient is experience. A facilitator becomes better with age having had valuable opportunities to synthesize the theory of process models, skills, and techniques with practical experience.

Suggested Reading

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Lessons Learned

National Endowment for the Arts
Contact the [Web Manager](#).

Examining Group Facilitation In Situ: The Use of Formulations in Facilitation Practice. Intrapersonal Emotional Responses to the Inquiry and Advocacy Modes of Intrapersonal Emotional Responses to the Inquiry and Advocacy Modes of Interaction: A Psychophysiological Study. See also.Â Tables, Tablets and Flexibility: Evaluating Planning Support System Tables, Tablets and Flexibility: Evaluating Planning Support System Performance under Different Conditions of Use. Asking Questions: A Sine Qua Non of Facilitation in Decision Support?Â Marleen McCardle-Keurentjes, EtiÃ«nne A. J. A. Rouwette. Asking Questions: A Sine Qua Non of Facilitation in Decision Support?, Group Decision and Negotiation, 2018, pp. 1-32, DOI: 10.1007/s10726-018-9573-y. Home. Facilitation has never been more important. In an age of ever-more meetings, workshops, and training courses, having someone in the room whose job it is to create engagement and make things easier for the group is vital to creating great outcomes. But how to know when you need a facilitator or what facilitation skills you need to make your meetings and workshops more effective? PlannersWeb: Holding Effective Public Meetings (2014) â€“ Very useful article on effective public meetings with tips drawn from a survey of planning commission members and staff. National Endowment for the Arts: Effective Meeting Facilitation: The Sine Qua Non of Planning (2005) - This brief guide offers particularly thoughtful tips about planning and running a meeting from start to finish.Â University of North Carolina School of Government: Citizen Academies - Clearinghouse of information on citizens' academies, information, and innovative practices culled from dozens of successful programs across the country. Planning Association of Washington and Washington State Department of Commerce. Facilitation Skills Managers Need. How to Plan a Meeting. How to Conduct a Meeting. How to Solve Problems in a Meeting.Â You need to plan all of this in advance. Sending someone out mid-meeting to order sandwiches makes your meeting less effective. Logistics planning involves these skills. Logistics Planning and Experience.Â Your understanding of non-verbal communication can help see when there is true agreement versus spoken agreement just to finish the meeting. Be cognizant of body language as a way to experience the total communication voice of an individual or a team. The Bottom Line.