

MEETINGS AND SOUND DECISION-MAKING

Norms in meetings grow up willy-nilly, like Dickens' street urchins who "tumble up" instead of being raised. Agendas, specific meeting roles, group guidelines and meeting evaluations all facilitate productive dialogue, which is a prerequisite of sound group decision-making and a healthy work climate.

Agendas

Agendas are maps that help everybody see where they are heading, list beginning and end times for topics and decision junctures, and form the basis for notes that you circulate after each meeting.

Meeting roles

Several roles need to be filled at every meeting. One person can fill several roles.

- An agenda planner takes responsibility for planning the agenda and sending it to participants.
- A facilitator guides the meeting.
- A note taker takes notes, or collects flipcharts, types them up, and sends them to participants after the meeting. Meeting notes should include decisions made, who is responsible, and what the completion or implementation deadline is.
- The time keeper uses the starting times listed on the agenda to monitor the progress of the meeting. He/she speaks up or raises her/his hand when the group goes over time on any agenda item. In this way, the facilitator and group can decide how to proceed.

Group guidelines

Group guidelines serve two important purposes. They encourage open, respectful discussion by reminding participants that each member's behavior—not conformity to unhelpful group norms, or good intentions, or organizational status—are the lifeblood of sound group deliberation and decision-making. Secondly, guidelines make monitoring and adjusting behavior a minute to minute, real time, shared enterprise instead of the province of the facilitator or positional leaders who call other people on unhelpful behavior. Take a look at the list in the side bar at the right, or ask the group to make their own list, and then use this list at every meeting.

Evaluations

Great meetings balance three features: achievement of objectives or outcomes, good working relationships, and workable, efficient processes. Meeting evaluations give people permission to give feedback on all three facets. Furthermore, group self-reflection engenders a norm of continuous improvement.

List "evaluation" as a standard agenda item and name "evaluate each meeting" as a group guideline. A meeting evaluation takes five minutes. Ask the group to call out strengths and areas to improve. Record all ideas in two columns on a flipchart. The agenda planner and facilitator use these ideas to improve meeting processes.

Together, these five sound practices remind meeting participants to conduct themselves mindfully, get real work done, reflect, and improve.

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Group guidelines

Here is a list adapted from Roger Schwarz's excellent book, *The Skilled Facilitator*.

- Test assumptions.
- Explain the reasons behind statements, questions and actions.
- Make statements; invite questions and comments.
- Be specific, using data and examples.
- Share all information relevant to this meeting.
- Focus on common ground.
- Disagree openly.
- Jointly create ways to test disagreements and find solutions.
- Discuss undiscussable issues.
- Keep the discussion focused.
- Avoid cheap shots.
- Agree on what important words mean.
- Be explicit about the decision-making processes used.
- Evaluate each meeting before adjourning.

Book coming!

A Strategic Planning Guide for Leaders of Small Organizations,

by Merryn Rutledge, will be available from *ReVisions* on April 15, 2005.

Order from
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