
Common Issues in Meeting Facilitation: A Quick Q/A for *Early On* Coordinators

Facilitating a meeting can be a challenging task. The subject matter may be complicated, participants may have difficulty reaching a consensus, or personality conflicts may exist within the group. This guide will help you to understand common meeting dynamics and provide you with tips¹ to keep your meeting on track.

1. My team members have never worked together. How can I set the tone for cooperation right from the start?

When working with groups, it is often beneficial to set “ground rules” prior to starting your meeting. These ground rules give the team a common bond and help establish the tone for how your meetings will be run.

Sample Ground Rules:

1. Come on time and be prepared.
2. Listen respectfully, acknowledge other viewpoints as valid.
3. One person speaks at a time.
4. Be brief, say what is essential.
5. Be honest. (No disfavor or penalty or reprisal will occur for honesty.)
6. Place greater emphasis on the good of the group than on personal preference or need, speak to the big picture.
7. Remember that others really do see the world differently from you.
8. Focus on behaviors and problems, not on personalities.
9. Consider conflict as a necessary stage along the path of progress.
10. Look for ways to enlarge the pie instead of worrying about how big your piece is to be.
11. Maintain team/group integrity and confidentiality.
12. Give the meeting leader/facilitator the power to interrupt, maintain order, and keep the group focused on the stated goals.
13. Hold your team accountable.

2. I am having trouble getting members of my team to participate in team discussions. How can I encourage them to engage in the conversation?

Use Leading Questions. Asking questions that help people express their ideas and draw people out encourages discussion. Consider using leading questions like:

- What is your reaction to....?
- How do you feel about...?
- What is your thinking on...?

- What brings you to conclude that...?
- What are some other ways to get at...?

Take a Survey. You can stimulate discussion through activity. Start by asking for a show of hands. Follow up by calling on individual team members and asking them to describe why they do/do not support a specific action.

Share Your Feelings. Engage team members by taking the lead. Share your opinion and encourage others to comment on your position.

3. My team members seem distracted. Why won't they listen?

Capturing and maintain the group's attention is a crucial part of arriving at sound decisions. Unfortunately, distractions are not an uncommon problem and may occur for many reasons. Use the following tips to help keep your team members engaged in the discussion.

Problem: The issue is emotionally charged and/or uncomfortable to discuss. Team members chose to disengage from the conversation rather than risk a confrontation.

Solution: Try and diffuse the emotional charge by bringing the conversation back to the facts. Remind team members that you value their input and that reaching a consensus is an important part of the analysis and improvement process.

Problem: Team members are not following the discussion because they are busy planning what they want to say next.

Solution: Keep the conversation on point by summarizing what your team members have to say. Often, when members are busy thinking ahead, they lose track of the current discussion. Politely reinforce the topic, and ask your members to specifically address that issue.

Problem: Team members appear to be daydreaming.

Solution: Engage members by asking for their opinion. Bring them back to the discussion by restating the last point made, and asking for their opinion.

4. I'm having trouble managing the personalities on my team.

Managing group dynamics is often the single most difficult aspect of facilitating a meeting. Use the following tables to help understand and improve communication among team members.

Personality Trait	Characteristics	What to do
Overly talkative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eager beaver • Well informed • Wants to show knowledge • Naturally wordy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help direct the conversation, "That's an interesting point, now let's see what the group thinks" • Don't embarrass the participant or be sarcastic
Uncommunicative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bored • Indifferent • Feels superior/ inferior • Timid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be natural and friendly • Ask questions requiring an answer beyond yes or no • Position yourself near the person so that they feel they are talking to you, not the whole group

Personality Trait	Characteristics	What to do
Tongue-tied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant understands concept but cannot articulate thought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help the conversation along, “let me see if I understand you correctly” then try and summarize thought Check with participant to make sure you summarized correctly
Inaccurate commentator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant offers information that is clearly incorrect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handle delicately so as not to embarrass participant State authority for correct information
Rambler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talks about everything except the subject Gets lost on topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thank participant for information, restate relevant points and move on Smile in a friendly manner, state the point is off topic and note that there is a lot of information yet to cover
Arguer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obstinate Won't budge Prejudiced Won't see other's point of view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind participant that purpose of the process is to gather information from as many points of view as possible Thank the person for sharing and promise to follow up after the meeting

Meeting issue	Characteristic	What to do
Personality clash in group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two or more participants clash Group becomes divided into factions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize points of agreement and minimize disagreements to the greatest extent possible Draw attention to the objectives of the meeting
Side conversations in a group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be personal May be related Can be distracting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't embarrass them If you are moving around the room, go stand behind them Call on one of them, repeat the last remark made by the group and ask for their opinion

5. My team seems prone to conflict, making it difficult to reach a consensus on important issues. How can I effectively manage conflict and make our meetings more productive?

Most conflicts can be handled effectively by using clear, positive communication and addressing the following points:

- Clarify objectives.** Conflict may develop because participants have different understandings of the meeting’s objectives. Clarifying and reaching agreement on objectives is an important first step.
- Strive for understanding.** Often, when involved in a disagreement, people do not listen carefully to the opposition’s point of view. You may need to stop the action and make sure you can articulate all points of view.
- Focus on the rational.** Emotional involvement is a natural part of confrontation. However, sound decisions may not be reached if participants are too emotional. For the benefit of the outcome(s) keep attention focused on rational considerations—facts, supporting reasons, potential problems if a certain course of action is followed, etc.
- Generate alternatives.** Are there alternate solutions that address the needs of everyone involved? Participants often cannot see how any alternative to their solution exists. Other group members not tied to the conflict may generate reasonable alternatives.

Continuous Improvement & Monitoring System (**Part C**)

- **Table the issue.** Tabling can be effective when people need time to consider the arguments presented, or if emotions are too high to deal with an issue. This may also allow time for someone to gracefully retreat from a heated position.
- **Use humor.** Proper use of humor can reduce the emotional tension of confrontation and can serve as a release to clear the way for more rational problem solving.
- **Use a third party to facilitate.** Use of a third party may be required if other methods have failed. An outside perspective is often valuable in resolving disputes.

ⁱ Compiled and used with permission from "Meeting Management Basics" by Cheryl Cristinelli (http://www.fin.ucar.edu/hr/staff_dev/mtg_man/) and "Parents as Monitors: Essential Meeting Skills", LSU Health Sciences Center (<http://www.monitoringcenter.lsuhscc.edu/>).