



Expect more out of meetings

Professional facilitators can keep your meetings focused and productive

Running a successful meeting yourself isn't always as easy as it sounds, especially when you need to balance managing the meeting while actively participating in it. Partnering with a professional facilitator can help do both.

By Mike Gospe

Leaders and managers report that they spend a significant amount of time in meetings which are poorly run and do not produce meaningful results. It doesn't take many of these ineffective meetings to derail internal processes, stagnate decision making, and frustrate employees and managers. The best way to avoid this pitfall is to structure meetings using some proven facilitation techniques that will keep the team focused, constructive, and on track.

What is meeting facilitation?

Meeting facilitation takes place when a neutral person (the meeting facilitator) assists an organization in conducting productive and efficient meetings involving multiple parties, participants, and/or complex issues. Thus, a good meeting facilitator will make sure that a positive and proactive tone and agenda are set, the participants are prepared prior to the start of the meeting, there is a balanced level of engagement from everyone attending, and action items are clearly defined and owned prior to adjourning.

When should a professional meeting facilitator be used?

A meeting facilitator is most beneficial when teams need to tackle high-stakes, complex, or important issues, or when participants may be difficult to control.

However, when the group's leader assumes the role of facilitator in these meetings, trouble can follow. It is virtually impossible for the leader to be neutral on content issues, which is a prime requisite for an effective facilitator. When group leaders facilitate their own meetings, they often cross the line into control and advocacy for their point(s) of view. In turn, this

will shut down participation from others. Drifting from the agenda, lack of balanced participation, and running overtime are additional problems that can plague these meetings. Separating the leader and facilitator roles will help ensure that at least one person is focused on group process issues, managing the agenda, and keeping people involved.

A professional meeting facilitator can help members of a group get to know each other, learn to cooperate, and work issues together in real time. Having a skilled facilitator run a meeting will also help direct the energy and thoughts of the members to the task at hand so they can move forward in difficult or stagnant times. Such meetings might include retreats, brainstorming exercises, strategic planning and problem-solving sessions.

Why is meeting facilitation important?

Meeting facilitation has become a more important communication skill in recent times. Many organizations have restructured in an attempt to involve more employees in the operations and decision-making of the company, and thus organizations are relying more heavily on the input of individual employees in a wide variety of decisions. By the same token, professionals in many areas are increasingly being asked to work as members of cross-functional groups. Effective and engaging facilitation has become a critical and required skill for coordinating the ideas and contributions of diverse sets of people within any company. Facilitators play an essential role in these meetings by encouraging teamwork, driving decisions, and maximizing the overall organizational effectiveness of today's companies.

