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Facilitating Consensus

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Effective facilitation is one of the five basic elements necessary for the consensus decision-making process to work. The other four are common purpose, willingness to share power, informed consent, and a strong agenda. Although the focus of this paper is facilitation within the specific context of consensus, the outlined skills and insights are equally applicable in other group processes and settings as well.

The facilitation of consensus is a sacred responsibility. A facilitator is the custodian of the process and a guide, not a participant. As a servant-leader, a facilitator should both believe the work of the group is important and be willing to serve the group. A facilitator needs to be assiduously neutral about the topics being discussed and fair in the treatment of all members of the group. A facilitator does not give answers and instead continuously asks questions that are intended to equalize participation. A facilitator is the expert in process and not content and serves at the pleasure of the group.

The basic responsibilities of a facilitator fall into three categories: pre- and post-meeting logistics, honoring the agenda contract, and process. A good facilitator, by fulfilling these responsibilities, can save the group 50 percent of its time; a poor one can cost it as much.

Pre- and Post-Meeting Logistics

The structure of meetings should give participants courage and confidence and build trust and solidarity. One of the keys to a successful meeting that allows the group's creativity to flower in the shortest possible time is agenda planning-"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." The best technique is to hold a separate agenda planning meeting concerned primarily with the process. This meeting will probably take as long as the actual meeting.

The agenda planning group should include the facilitator and two or three group members. This meeting should also be open to any bona fide member

of the group that wants to participate. This group will: develop a proposed agenda, including the order of items and associated time limits; identify topics for the meeting and sponsors for each item who are prepared to provide the necessary background and context; decide what processes might be most useful for each time; and try to identify potentially contentious issues or "icebergs" ahead of time.

The facilitator, with the help of the agenda planning team, makes sure that the meeting space is clean and well ventilated and the temperature is comfortable. Adding color and softness to a bare institutional setting with greenery, flowers, "real cups," etc., is a good idea. Plastic, styrofoam, and other single-use items should be avoided. Make sure that arrangements for refreshments or food have been made and that the necessary easel(s), paper, markers, tape, and other tools are on hand. Arrange the room appropriately and position the easel so that the facilitator is as far from the door as possible, all participants can see the easel, and light from the window does not cause glare. The principal post-meeting consideration is to make sure that a committee or individual is assigned to follow-up on decisions made by the group.

Honoring the Agenda Contract

The facilitator makes sure that the basic elements of the agenda-opening, introductions, review of agenda, announcements, evaluation, and closing-are executed with quality. The facilitator is responsible for beginning and ending the meeting on time and making sure the group is focused and on task.

The opening gives formal shape to the beginning of the process and provides people time to make the transition from their "regular" lives into the meeting space. It reminds the group who they are and why they are there. Introductions let each person's voice be heard at the beginning of the meeting, create a safe way for people to open themselves up to each other, and are a "warm up" for the tasks ahead. The question used to facilitate the introductions should be phrased concisely and clearly and the length of answer desired (one word, a phrase, a sentence, one minute or less, etc.) should be explicitly indicated. The more closely the question relates to the interests or experience of the group members, the more interesting, spontaneous, and self-revealing answers will be.

The review of the "proposed agenda" gives people ownership of the agenda, assures them that time is allotted for their issues, clarifies whether issues are being introduced, discussed, or decided upon, and creates a contract among the group members. The facilitator begins the review by stating, "This is the agenda that has been prepared for your consideration." Then the facilitator explains who created the proposed agenda, outlines its elements, guides the negotiation of any revisions, makes sure the ending time is clearly noted and understood, and when the agenda is finalized crosses off "proposed."

Announcements can be scheduled at a convenient point on the agenda and provide an opportunity for group members to share information with the group

as a whole. The form of the evaluation used can be proposed by the agenda planning group and should meet the specific needs of the group as a whole. The key aspect of the closing is that it occurs on time-at the time listed on the finalized agenda.

Process

The basic tasks for the facilitator are to encourage everyone to participate, protect people and their ideas from attack, suggest alternative methods and procedures when necessary, ask questions rather than give orders, maintain a relaxed atmosphere (especially when a contentious issue arises), and bring conflict out into the open to work through it instead of smoothing it over. The three stages of the consensus process that are used for each proposal considered by the group are (1) introduction, (2) discussion, and (3) decision. These were outlined in more detail in a previous issue entitled "Consensus Decision Making." The facilitator uses the process skills noted above to guide the group to a point on each proposal until consensus has or has not been reached. Each time the group arrives at consensus the facilitator asks the minute taker to repeat the details of the proposal to permit the correction of any mistakes in the minutes and to give the group a chance to celebrate.

Resources

This overview is based to a large extent on Briggs, Beatrice, and Leyshon, Shari, "Consensus: The Way Healthy Communities Make Decisions," Conscious Choice (January 1995) and an unpublished manuscript of the same name by these authors.

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