Guide to Effective Meetings
Readings in Facilitation Skills

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The Most Important Tool for Successful Meetings

Do you wish you ran better meetings? By using an **outcome-based agenda**, you will experience an immediate, extraordinary improvement.

**What is an Outcome-Based Agenda?**

Put simply, an outcome-based agenda is a plan that states “*what will have changed*” by the end of the meeting.

You, the meeting leader, develop and execute the meeting outcomes. These serve as **your job description** for the meeting’s duration.

Meeting outcomes always begin with the words, “By the end of this meeting, we will have…” The verb you choose to finish this statement is of utmost importance.

Do you see the difference in the examples below? They are listed in the order of complexity:

- “By the end of this meeting, we will have discussed…”
- “By the end of this meeting, we will have brainstormed…”
- “By the end of this meeting, we will have decided…”

The biggest mistake meeting leaders make is to promise more than the meeting can deliver, based on the time allotted. By taking the time to figure out exactly what is achievable in the time allotted, and by stating it using the future perfect form of the verb (“will have ________ed”) the meeting leader has a much better chance at success.

**How to Develop an Outcome-Based Agenda**
1. Get input from stakeholders. (Stakeholders may include meeting members, their bosses, or anyone with a “stake” in the ultimate meeting product.) Ask them, “What do you think should be included in our next agenda?”

Stakeholder input is essential. However, it’s YOUR job to synthesize the input you receive, and to weigh and decide what can realistically be accomplished in the time that you have for the meeting.

2. Using stakeholder input as the core, create the meeting outcome statement. Always begin with the words, “By the end of this meeting, we (or you) will have...” Choose a verb that is achievable in the time frame allotted. For example, for a 45-minute, very first meeting, one outcome might be:

“By the end of this meeting, we will have learned more about the problem and brainstormed possible solutions.”

If your meeting is ninety minutes long, you could say instead: “By the end of this meeting, we will have:

- learned more about the problem,
- brainstormed possible solutions, and
- made preliminary choices of the best solutions.”

Can you sense the difference in time needed for these two very different sorts of meetings?

3. Put the outcome statements at the top of the agenda.

E-mail them to meeting members. Write them on the whiteboard and state them at the beginning of the meeting. Any way you can, make it very clear what “will have changed” as a result of the meeting.

Guess what? By using these guidelines to develop and use an achievable outcome statement, your meetings will become shorter, less painful, and more productive. I guarantee it!
RULES? Who Needs RULES? Part One

The Prickly Role of Meeting Guidelines

During my facilitation skills workshops over the last ten years, I've often said, “Meeting Guidelines are a Facilitator’s Best Friend.” Upon delivering this statement, I'm often zapped with conflicting internal reactions. Either my personal Internal Anarchist silently screams in rebellion, or I feel like I’ve just delivered the most intelligent dictum that has ever passed any facilitator's lips.

Meeting Guidelines (also called Agreements, ground rules, code of cooperation, or norms) are behaviors that meeting members agree to abide by in order to produce an environment that makes it safe for everyone to speak and to be heard. To speak and to be heard—a facilitator’s primary job is to enable those two actions. So what’s my beef?

The Anarchist
I have a hard time with rules. I resist them myself. As a facilitator, I harbor a deep wish that group members could speak and hear difficult, challenging, and even inflammatory statements without relying on behavioral guidelines to ensure civility.

But the human race hasn't reached that stage of evolution. We live in a world of gossip, divisiveness, and hate radio. Many group members, even in buttoned-down organizations, seem to thrive on the release of rage. Others fear potential rage in others, and clam up as a protective measure. Meetings too often resemble a “free-for-all,” but the only people acting freely are those who love the sound of their own voices.

Unfortunately, the reality of group behavior sorely undermines my Internal Anarchist. I must leave that part of me behind and turn to the most fundamental part of the facilitator role.

Holder of a Safe Space
As a facilitator, I develop and maintain a safe environment for group communication. My role is not to shut people down if they’re saying something unpleasant, but instead to hold a safe space for that unpleasantness to be heard, and to help the group deal effectively with it.
The appropriate use of group agreements can literally transform a meeting from a shouting match into a dialogue. So, my role as the Holder of a Safe Space wins out over my Internal Anarchist. The use of meeting guidelines is in.

**When to Develop Guidelines? Busting Conventional Wisdom**

Traditionally, facilitators help a group develop behavioral agreements during the first meeting. This works well for stand-alone meetings. However, facilitators may want to consider a different approach when facilitating a series of ongoing meetings.

The approach I prefer is very “real-life”. It acknowledges Barry Tuckman’s four stages of group development, which are generally accepted as the natural evolution of dynamics within groups. Here is a quick review of these stages:

**Forming (Stage 1)**
The group experiences a high dependence on the facilitator for guidance and direction. Members are polite.

**Storming (Stage 2)**
Decisions don’t come easily. Team members vie for position. Power, rank, status, and competing agendas arise.

**Norming (Stage 3)**
Life gets easier. Roles and responsibilities are clear and accepted.

**Performing (Stage 4)**
The team has a shared vision and is able to stand on its own feet with no interference or participation from the leader.

*So, at which stage is it optimal to develop group agreements?*

**Surprise: Try doing it during the “Storming” stage.** In Stage Two, superficial politeness has pretty much fallen away, though members yearn for stability. This stage offers a rich opportunity. People’s personalities and agendas are truly revealed. Everything’s out on the table. Behavioral agreements born in the heat of Stage Two take on much more meaning and authenticity than if they had been developed earlier.
RULES? Who Needs RULES? Part Two

The Prickly Role of Meeting Guidelines

Last month, we took a stab at the question, “Rules? Who Needs Rules?” in regards to meeting management. In that article, I explored the wisdom of developing behavioral guidelines to support ongoing meetings. (Read Part One. [1])

Something that I suggested in Part One was that facilitators wait to introduce the idea of developing ground rules until the group reaches its second, or “Storming” stage of development. (Again, I invite you to read Part One [1] for this discussion, because the arguments may feel counter-intuitive.)

3 Tips to Tame Unruly Meetings

OK, so your group has reached the Storming stage. Group members have begun jockeying for position. Personal agendas pop up. You, as the facilitator, struggle with the feeling that you’re a helpless little boat, tossed about in a great big sea. So what do you do now?

1. Ask the Magic Question.
   Explain that the time has come to take a look, from a process perspective, at where the group is.

   Encourage members to relax and reflect on what dynamics have been successful to this point. First, acknowledge the fact that dynamics have in fact gotten choppy. (You may want to quickly introduce Tuckman’s four stages of group development [2].) Then, say something like:

   “I’d like you to look back to our first few meetings. Please recall what behaviors people were modeling at that time. Try to actually “see” those early meetings in your mind.

   “Now I’d like you to silently answer this question: What behaviors ‘worked’ for you? What behaviors did you see, or practiced yourself, that helped to make these meetings both productive and pleasant?”

   Repeat the question a couple of times. Allow some time for reflection. Then ask for members to report, and list the behaviors they come up with on the flipchart. When you have noted five to seven, stop.

   Go down the list, reading each suggested behavior aloud, asking group members to raise their hands if they agree to practice this behavior themselves. Elicit editing and tweaking, especially from those who resist. If someone doesn’t raise their
hand, make it clear that he/she must revise the suggestion until it “works” for them. Make it clear that the group’s productivity depends on everyone’s sharing a set of agreements for behavior.

Explanation: When a group visualizes functional behaviors that it once demonstrated, these behaviors make a lot of sense. They also don’t seem out of members’ reach, since the group acknowledges that it actually modeled these functional behaviors at one time.

2. Deconstruct Vague Responses.
   In suggesting behaviors to be included on the list, members inevitably offer words like “respect” and civility.

Write the word, but also ask: “What does ‘respect’ look like? What behaviors would I see that express respect?” Then, write those more descriptive words, which illustrate the concept from a behavioral viewpoint.

Here’s an example:

Sally offers “Civility.” You write it on the chart, but also ask the group, “What does ‘civility’ look like? Give me some behaviors that would make it clear to any observer that ‘civility’ is being practiced.” The group will reflect, and then offer suggestions including “Refrain from eye-rolling,” or “Let the person finish their statement before commenting.”

By deconstructing vague responses, you are developing a list of supportive, visible behaviors. You also offer an opportunity to discuss how respect or civility might manifest quite differently depending on culture.

3. Post the Agreements.
   Keep the agreements posted throughout each meeting. Create a handout for the next session, but also always post them visibly and review them at each meeting.

A Last Word

Along with an outcome-based agenda, meeting guidelines are a facilitator’s best friend. Use them to support a productive, safe environment for any ongoing group process.
“Difficult People” vs. Difficult Dynamics

I have a message for trainers, facilitators and presenters. I know that you sometimes stay awake at night worrying about how to respond if an audience member challenges you, if participants lock horns, or when a meeting or training session gets just plain thorny.

To address your insomnia, you may have searched for guidance by Googling “dealing with difficult people.” By doing so, you discover a veritable stew of tips, techniques, training programs, books, and articles. And you’ll especially discover labels. Experts in the “difficult people” business love labels. Typically they offer labels such as these:

- The Know-It-All
- The Show-Off
- The Rambler

Then they prescribe behaviors to deal with each label. Unfortunately, all situations are different, so prescriptions only go so far. Plus, there is a danger in labeling people. You may cease seeing participants as living, breathing, multi-dimensional human beings.
We Are All “Difficult People”

To be a person is to be difficult. “Difficult people” are often just regular people responding to difficult dynamics. Difficult dynamics can include:

- Organizational change
- Bad room set-up or temperature control
- Mandatory attendance
- Ambiguity about how the event will benefit the individual
- Personal challenges, such as hunger and low blood sugar.

What trainers, facilitators and presenters need to know is:

- You can’t fix people.
- You can reduce difficult dynamics, thus lowering the risk of reactive behavior.

3 Ways to Reduce Difficult Dynamics

You may have little control over organizational change or mandatory attendance. However, these steps will address a broad spectrum of difficult dynamics:

1. Set Up the Room for the Outcome You Desire
   Do you want participant engagement, interaction, and accountability? Then don’t use classroom or theater style seating. Seat people in groups of 5-6 so that they communicate with each other, not just with you. It’s harder for participants to withdraw or act out when they are eyeball-to-eyeball with others.

2. Clarify the Benefits and State Clear Expectations
   You MUST be able to express on why this topic is important to the participants and how it will benefit them. Then clearly state how the day is structured and what behaviors you expect.

3. Model both Authoritative and Cooperative Behaviors
   Create and maintain an accepting environment. Encourage people to express themselves and to ask questions. Simultaneously, set and hold limits. One example might be to say “for the sake of time, and to make sure that everyone has at least one opportunity to ask a question, please limit your questions to one per person.”

Don’t stoop to labeling human beings in the name of achieving smooth dynamics. Ultimately, this strategy will backfire. Instead, become more aware of your own behavior, and prevent difficult dynamics before they occur.
# Bibliography:

## Great Books To Build Your Facilitation Skills

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