

"Process Happens"

Notes on Process and Facilitation

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A consensus on terms of engagement and decision-making process are essential parts of group trust and effectiveness. Process is often neglected as an unimportant detail or as an uncomfortable social impediment to the "real work." In reality, until a group decision-making and meeting process is developed and agreed upon, groups can flounder within the framework of conflicting or problematic personalities, relationship dynamics, unclear focus or different agendas that can create confusing and ineffective interaction. It is much more pleasant and much more efficient to consciously and practically address process and agree upon ways the entire group can proceed. It is valuable to think of process as a contract or agreement among colleagues. Once this piece of business is done, the work at hand will flow much more freely.

Clarifying relationships between groups within coalitions, flow charts indicating those empowered to make decisions and ample chance for evaluation are all important components of good process. Written notes should be taken and distributed to record decisions made so that proposals are not revisited unless there is agreement to do so.

Effective facilitation of meetings is everybody's responsibility and can be seen as a contract between participants to be clear about the purpose of the meeting, establish an agenda, stay within subject and time limits, work toward decision, accomplish the goals of the meeting, perform tasks within agreed upon timelines, and to treat each other with respect (especially at times of disagreement).

The role of the facilitator is not to lead the group or determine the agenda, but to help the group stay "on track" on an agenda everyone supports and to facilitate the expression of as many as possible in the group. Good facilitation is an important skill that takes practice.

Rotation of the role of facilitator helps to promote overall groups skills and distributes responsibility.

Before the meeting begins, not in the midst of a heated issue, is the time to set a time limit for the meeting, determine who will facilitate and keep time and what method of decision-making is used -- consensus or majority vote (and what constitutes a majority).

TECHNIQUES

1. Set the Agenda/Agenda Review

The agenda is the map of the meeting:

* Advance Agenda -- A working group can create a draft agenda to be presented at the beginning of the meeting for review. In the case of on-going or regularly scheduled meetings, the next draft agenda can be created by the previous meeting's participants.

* Begin with a Draft -- At the beginning of the meeting, a draft agenda is reviewed and new agenda items can be added or subtracted and time limits should be established for each agenda item.

2. Time Limits

* When time limits are reached for each item and more discussion is needed, participants can "contract for more time" to extend the time allotted. In this way, everyone agrees on a new time limit and is aware of the amount of time spent on each item. Contracting for time on an agenda item should be done when time is up, not after more discussion.

* A timekeeper (someone other than the facilitator) is designated for each meeting. The timekeeper can signal the facilitator and the meeting participants when the time for each item's time is almost reached (one minute or five minute warning) and when time is up.

* When participants volunteer to complete tasks within a certain time frame or by a certain meeting date, they should inform the group ahead of the time if they cannot accomplish the task within the promised time frame.

* Breaks should be scheduled periodically to allow for a reasonable pace for the meeting or to allow for a "cool off" period if there is disagreement. Sometimes people can come to some kind of compromise in a more informal setting.

3. Speaking in Turn

Discussions for small meetings can usually proceed informally, but at times, when many participants want to speak, it works best to speak in turn.

* Participants raise their hands and the facilitator calls on them in order establishing a queue. Participants keep track of their place in the line and speak at their turn, or the facilitator can keep track by name or by number. Participants can try avoid repeating what has already been said, but can reiterate or agree with a previous statement.

4. Decision-Making Process

* Proposals are recommended to the group, followed by discussion and then tested for acceptance. When a proposal is made, the discussion should pertain directly to that proposal.

* The criteria for decision-making (consensus, majority vote, number necessary to achieve a quorum) should be determined ahead of time, not at the moment of decision. Decisions can be made by consensus (everyone agrees) or by a majority (percentage to be established).

* A quorum (minimum number needed to make decisions) should be established to protect the concerns of the larger group.

* Participants who disagree with a proposal but find themselves in a minority can "stand aside" and allow the proposal to pass while continuing to state concerns.

5. Humor, Respect and Tolerance

Always helpful. It is essential that group members treat each other with respect especially at times of disagreement. Personal attacks and threats engender distrust. Grace and tolerance are central to the health of any group endeavor and it is the responsibility of all to encourage this kind of atmosphere. Everyone should address breaches of respect with swift intervention and the establishment of boundaries.

6. Break the Ice

Start of the meeting with some kind of group exercise. Go-round introductions, sharing food, talking about an issue of substance (something congruent to the purpose of the meeting not requiring a decision), introduce each other to the group, other ways for people to be the people they are and express their warmth.

7. Evaluate the Meeting

After each meeting, go-round and share about the effectiveness of the meeting with suggestions on how to do it better the next time.

8. Talking Circle

One of the simplest forms of group communication is a talking circle. Seated in a circle, each person can speak as long as they want without interruption. The selection of the speaker can be in a go-round, holding a "talking stick," or when someone is ready to speak. This form can be used when important issues need to be explored fully, or as a way to begin or evaluate.