



The Secrets of Facilitation: How to Make Meetings Masterful

By Kristi Royse

A quick show of hands: Who hates meetings?

So that would be most of you, right? It's not surprising. Workers across this country are gripped with soul-deadening angst as they shuffle down hallways to attend weekly reviews of "housekeeping issues." Years of our lives are slipping away in stuffy, overcrowded conference rooms, and nobody seems to be doing anything about it. Meetings can bring down morale and blow holes in the productivity of a workday. Pitifully few constructive ideas come out of them which means, of course, that yet another round of meetings will be called.

Taking into account a company's bottom line, the picture becomes even grimmer. For all the value employers are getting from meetings, they might as well open the windows and throw cash to the breeze—at least it would save time. Meetings should be a precious resource; unfortunately they are treated like a necessary evil.

Facilitators are ultimately responsible for the quality and effectiveness of their meetings. They have the power to create a meeting that succeeds or a meeting that disappoints. What follows are some secrets effective facilitators use that will help you make your meetings masterful.

The Secret of Preparation

A little preparation can transform your meetings from a dreaded chore to a useful tool, and the first step to doing that is to identify your goal.

What do you want out of this meeting? What do your attendees want? Before you can go any further you must figure this out. You are not meeting for meeting's sake. You are meeting to accomplish goals. A meeting should be held because you wish to do something—communicate information, brainstorm ideas, or solve a problem. Facilitators should know why the meeting is being held and what they hope to accomplish in the course of the meeting. Without an objective, meetings can meander off course.

The swiftest way to accomplish a goal is to map out the steps required to achieve it. Preparation before a meeting can save time during it. Circulate a solid agenda in advance so that participants can prepare to address the topics that will be covered in the meeting. An agenda ensures participants will bring all required materials to the meeting and will stay on topic. Without an agenda important issues can be overlooked, and topics unrelated to the task at hand can use up valuable time.

The Secret of Starting Start with a Bang

How you start a facilitated meeting is critical to its overall success. Conventional wisdom states that a good meeting should start with an agenda. The reason typically given is that the agenda answers the question, “What are we going to do?” Smart facilitators, however, know that participants in a facilitated session need several questions answered before the agenda is discussed:

- Why are we having this meeting?
- What do we need to have accomplished when we are done?
- What is my role in the decision making?
- Why should I invest my time in this meeting?

Smart facilitators answer these questions and more in the first fifteen minutes of a meeting. The opening sets the tone, pace and expectations for the rest of the day. Your opening words should do four key things: inform, excite, empower, and involve (IEEI).

- **Inform** the participants about the overall purpose of the meeting by discussing the objectives and deliverables.

- **Excite** the participants about the process by giving them a clear vision of the overall result to be achieved and how this will benefit them.
- **Empower** the participants by discussing the important role each person plays in the process, the reason they were selected or the authority that has been given to them by being a part of this particular meeting.
- **Involve** the participants as early as possible by identifying their personal objectives, the issues that must be covered, the challenges that must be overcome or some other topic that contributes to the overall goal of the meeting.

The Secret of Focusing

How do you focus the group and keep them focused? How do you prevent the group from going off on long, unproductive detours? Make each agenda item a FIRST CLASS item:

- **Focus** the participants by providing an explanation of how the agenda item furthers the meeting's purpose.
- **Instruct** the participants by providing clear and concise directions on how the agenda item will be executed.
- **Record** the appropriate information gathered during the meeting.
- **Step** the participants through the agenda item, using the appropriate information gathering processes.
- **Track** time to ensure that the participants are using it appropriately.
- **Control** and resolve any dysfunctional behavior quickly and effectively.
- **Listen** for off-topic discussions, and redirect these to a parking board to be discussed later.
- **Address** disagreements or conflicts that emerge.
- **Seek** all opinions and invite people to share their views.
- **Summarize** the results.

The Secret of Closing a Meeting

Meetings frequently accelerate in the latter stages because everyone wants out, but a quick recap at the end of a meeting is an important part of good facilitation. If you want everyone to walk out of the meeting knowing exactly what they're supposed to do, close it with a five-minute synthesis report that reviews the major points of the meeting. When a meeting ends, participants should be able to answer the following:

- What did we accomplish?
- What decisions did we make?
- What can we tell others about the meeting?
- How will the meeting be documented?
- What's going to happen when we leave this room?
- Who is responsible for making it happen?
- How will we know that it has happened?
- When do we come back together?
- What will we do when we come back together?

The real joy of doing a recap at the end of a meeting is realizing how many extraneous meetings you won't need in the future. By taking the time to do a synthesis report and clarifying potential outcomes, next steps, and who is responsible for each one, you minimize your number of follow-up meetings. The meetings you do need will now be meetings that are goal oriented and productive; they will be meetings that succeed and do not disappoint.

By preparing well for your meetings, starting them off with a bang, keeping them focused and closing each with a synthesis report you will make all of your meetings masterful and well worth the time.

Meeting adjourned!

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