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Five tips for facilitators

Source: Unpublished training resources, *The Wilderness Society*

1. Focus your attention on the facilitation of the meeting rather than your own feelings and ideas.

REASON: As facilitator, you've accepted the job of making the meeting run well for everyone. The chair is not the place to air your own opinions and grudges. Like the director of a play, your job is to work out the best way to do things, not to speak all the parts, do the acting, or write the script.

SUGGESTIONS: Talk to someone before the meeting so you can get your pet loves and hates out of your system. Think through your approaches to situations that are likely to come up and that you might find difficult or distracting. Talk your fears and strategies through to clear your head and to clarify the issues. For example, if someone always uses sexist language in meetings and it makes you feel like punching you out, first work out a strategy for keeping your cool. Then think over how you could effectively bring it to their attention. If it's an ongoing problem, it may be something the whole group needs to address.

If you have strong views on an agenda item, which no one else seems likely to speak about, try to see to it (before the meeting begins) that someone who agrees with you puts your view to the meeting.

If in spite of planning in this way, you feel that you really must speak and no one else has covered the point you want to make, pass responsibility for facilitation to someone else while you make your point and while the group discusses it. Do this very clearly and directly. For example; "I would like to address this point, so I'd like to pass responsibility for facilitating to Robyn while we discuss this issue." When the discussion is over, take back responsibility for facilitation in the same way.

The idea here is to make the facilitator's role as neutral as possible, making sure that when you speak you're subject to the same limits as everyone else. It also allows you to give all your attention to the point you're trying to make while someone else takes responsibility for the running of the meeting. It's important that everyone at the meeting knows who is facilitating so that they know whose eye to catch when they want to speak.

2. Be observant. Keep watch over the way the meeting is running and notice where you can make it run better.

REASON: It's part of your job to make sure that everyone at the meeting has an opportunity and encouragement to participate. It's also important to keep track of the 'big picture'. If others lose sight of that, it's your task to bring it to their attention.

SUGGESTION: Always notice when consensus has been reached and people have begun to repeat themselves and each other because THEY haven't noticed. Summarise the consensus you think has been reached and ask the group if they agree with you. Then double check by asking "Dose anyone NOT agree?" on important issues, look around the room and seek a nod of the head from every person.

Always notice if two or more issues are getting muddled together when they could be discussed more efficiently separately. For example, time and valuable ideas will be lost if we discuss how much to charge for the fundraiser, what date to have it on, what to write on the poster and what bands to have - all at once. Break the question down into sections and suggest a structure: "It seems to me that we're getting a bit lost here. I suggest that we discuss price first, then the date, then the bands....."

Always notice if several issues are being discussed together when one of them really needs to be decided first. For example, time and valuable ideas will be lost if we discuss how much to charge for the conference without having discussed whether we want to run the conference at all, and then having worked out whether anyone is prepared to put in the amount of time and energy it will take to do it. Again, draw the problem to the attention of the group and suggest a structure.

Always notice who is waiting to speak, and in what order. Keeping track of this may prevent you from following what is being said or is distracting people in the meeting (e.g. if lots of hand waving is going on or people are getting surly because they didn't notice the six people who wanted to speak before them and so are convinced you've forgotten them). If this happens, ask who wants to speak and write their names down on a queue. Double check whether anyone else wants to be placed on the list.

Always notice groups or individuals that aren't speaking. Ask fidgety people if they wanted to speak. Make sure that people know that their contributions are valuable. If you've noticed that none of the people from organisation X have spoken or that none of the women have said anything yet, say that you've noticed it and ask if any of them would like to speak.

Always notice confusion. If you haven't understood, ask the person to explain, because you won't be able to do your job properly if you can't follow the discussion.

If you see confusion around you, or the discussion indicates to you that different people interpreted the question differently, summarise your understanding of what has been said so far, check that others agree, and then go on. If the confusion is already serious, summarise the source of the confusion as you see it and ask for information. For example, "It seems as though some of us thought that we'd decided to do X already, but others are still discussing whether or not we should do it. I think we need to clear that up before we go any further."

Don't blame anyone. That will make for more confusion. Discourage people from getting into "But in the other meeting he said" or, "In her letter she said" - this won't actually help with working out the best way to move forward, but will make for a more heated discussion which is likely to produce more confused people. Suggest that we stick to having today's meeting today and getting clear about what we want TODAY.

Always notice when a summary of what we've decided so far of what points of view have been expressed so far would help and provide it.

Always notice when confusing words or lots of acronyms (bunches of initials, such as S.A.F.E.) is being used and explain them. Encourage people who are in the meeting to do the same. For example: "Could you please explain what you mean by S.A.C.H.M.A.?" "I suggest that for the sake of those here who don't know all the abbreviations that the first time anyone uses one, they explain what it means."

Always notice when the debate has stopped and people are repeating points. Invite people to remove themselves from the queue unless they have a NEW point to make.

3. Always keep in mind the fact that the smooth running of the meeting is in everyone's best interests. Where necessary, remind people who have lost sight of this for the moment.

REASON: The long term survival of this organisation, the progressive movements generally, and each of us as individual activists depends on it. I also think that using this as a basic assumption allows the most creative solutions to tricky situations. If we have meetings that are lengthy, boring, and ineffective, where people feel too afraid to speak up and where the environment is unfriendly or outright hostile, we won't achieve much, and we'll lose a lot of people.

SUGGESTIONS: If the group has agreed on procedures it wants to follow or values that it wants to uphold in meetings, it's your job to remind people about them if they forget. Sometimes it will help to see them at the beginning of the meeting: "At the last meeting we agreed that we would all listen to each other with respect. Is everyone here prepared to keep to that agreement tonight?" or "Just a quick reminder that we've agreed that meetings will end at 9.00 p.m. There's a lot to discuss

tonight, so we'll all need to be brief and stick to the point to keep our deadline." If people break the group's agreement, wander from the point or talk at length they may need a gentle reminder.

The same goes for values that the group has agreed to uphold: "this group has agreed to make meetings run smoothly and to encourage everyone to participate, we all need to use language that isn't sexist or racist." Or it might be appropriate to suggest an alternative: "Perhaps we could minute that as staffing the door at the concert rather than manning it?" **DON'T FORGET TO KEEP TO THESE AGREEMENTS YOURSELF.**

If people get snittish with you for drawing these sorts of things to their attention, gently remind them that we've all agreed that these things are necessary to make the meeting run well, and you're just keeping your part of that agreement as facilitator. On this occasion that might mean that you've just told them it's not yet their turn to speak. You'll need to be told the same thing one day when you're passionate about the issue under discussion and someone else is facilitating. Don't engage in wasting time getting defensive if people respond to the procedure the group has agreed on, it can be changed anytime and this is in all our interests if the present system isn't workable.

Ask people who have agreed to get information to send a written report to the next meeting if they can't get to it in person.

4. Don't take sides. Be as neutral as you can.

REASON: The meeting will run better if everyone in the group knows that you will listen to their point of view and allow them to be heard by others. Of course you have opinions and feelings, and these will often be known to the group anyway. The people in the group need to be confident that when you are facilitating you will not act on your prejudices, cut off people whose opinions are different from yours, or use the chair to talk about your opinions and your feelings. Otherwise there will not be enough safety for everyone to participate.

SUGGESTION: Be aware of your own biases and take steps to get them off your chest somewhere else, where they won't affect the meeting.

Never do things, make remarks or make jokes that put down any person or group present at the meeting. Many people find meetings intimidating and don't need any encouragement in their shyness.

Your neutrality is especially important where conflict arises. Never contribute to a feeling of 'us and them'. Following the guidelines already given will usually lead to a consensus result, but... If things get really heated, instead of feeding the conflict, ask the people or groups involved to say what they're hoping to achieve from their proposals. What are their goals? What are they hoping to achieve by campaigning on X rather than Y or by using strategy A rather than strategy B? When all viewpoints present have answered these questions, aim to draw out whatever common ground is present and encourage the group to maximise it as co-operatively as possible. Bear in mind that your job, as facilitator is not to keep everyone happy but to assist in reaching a workable solution to the problem, conflict or goal.

If the group has come to a clear consensus about an issue with the exception of one or two people, make sure that those people have a chance to express why they disagree and what they propose instead. If the disagreement isn't overcome through discussion and so on, you can ask the dissenters if their disagreement is so serious that they are prepared to block consensus because of it. If they are, no consensus has been reached and the issue will have to be postponed.

5. Ask for help when you need it

REASON: As facilitator, you have an important job to do. If you don't do a good job, the whole meeting will suffer.

SUGGESTIONS: Ask for a break if you need one, help with setting the agenda, help from someone/s with skills or information you need, someone/s to discuss strategy with, someone/s to give you constructive feedback, hugs, or a glass of water...

Ideas for members of the group

Source: Unpublished training resources, *The Wilderness Society*

For a facilitator to do a good job, the group needs to agree on what the job involves. Two things are needed:

1. Agreement about what procedures the group wants to follow. Do we work by consensus or do we vote about things? So people who have spoken once have to wait for everyone else who wants to speak about a particular issue to speak before they get another turn? Is there a time limit on how long you can speak? Do we agree that we should split into small discussion groups to talk about the main item on the agenda in every meeting? Do speakers have to go through the facilitator? Do we take time at the end of every meeting where everyone has a chance to say how they felt the meeting went? ... And so on.
2. Agreement about the values that the group wants to uphold in meetings. Do we agree that we don't want sexist, racist, or homophobic language and remarks in our meetings? If we do, how do we put that into practice? Do we have a 'no blaming' rule? Do we agree that we don't want put-downs in our meetings?

For meetings to work well, we all need to take responsibility both for ourselves, and for the way the meetings run. The facilitator is there to help with the running of the meeting, not to act as a cop and keep people in line... we need to realise that we're all on the same team and work at co-operating.

Support people who take on jobs like minute taking and facilitating. They will do the job better, learn from their mistakes, and be prepared to take the job on again.

Testing for agreement

Source: A. Donovan (1992 unpublished) *Training Notes*

- Test as soon as a decision seems to be emerging. Periodic testing will clarify disagreement.
- Restate the proposal. Not "Do we all agree with what was just said?"
- Insist on a response from the group. Do not take silence for consent. Individuals need to be conscious of that they are doing.
- It may help to put the question in the negative. "Is there anyone who disagrees?"
- Be suspicious of easily reached agreements
- Ask those who disagree to restate their specific objections. Often people are misunderstood.
- Ask those who disagree to present an alternative proposal.
- The group may need a break to think their feelings through. Blocking is often a sign of a hurried decision. People may need more time to think it through.
- Develop a process for dealing with the issue in another forum.
- When one or two people are blocking, ask them if they will stand aside to allow the group to move forward. Offer to capture their views in the minutes

Functions of a group

Source: *The Conflict Resolution Network, PO Box 1016 Chatswood NSW 2057 Australia 02 9419 8500*

Task functions

- **Initiating activity:** proposing solutions, suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problems, new attacks on problems or new organisation of material.
- **Information seeking:** asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information on facts.
- **Information giving:** offering facts or generalisations, relating one's own experience to group problems to illustrate points.
- **Opinion giving:** stating an opinion of belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.
- **Elaborating:** clarifying, giving examples of developing meanings, trying to envisage how a proposal might work out if adopted.
- **Coordinating:** clarifying relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.
- **Summarising:** pulling together related ideas or suggestions, restating suggestions after the group has discussed them.
- **Testing feasibility:** making application of suggestions to real situations to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.
- **Checking standards:** submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.
- **Diagnosing:** determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks of progress.

Maintenance functions

- **Encouraging:** being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with them and accepting contributions of others.
- **Gate-keeping:** trying to make it possible for another member to make another contribution to the group by saying, "We haven't heard anything from Jim yet", or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.
- **Standard-setting:** expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures or in evaluating its decisions, reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.
- **Following:** going along with decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussion and decision making.
- **Expressing group feeling:** summarizing what group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.
- **Evaluating:** submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.
- **Consensus-testing:** tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test compromise solutions.
- **Harmonising:** mediating, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
- **Tension-reducing:** draining off negative feelings by jesting or pouring oil on troubled water, putting a tension situation in wider context.

Effective leaders balance task and maintenance functions

The 4 Ps of Effective meetings

Source: Katrina Shields "Making meetings effective"

Purpose

Be clear about why you need to have a meeting. How much is it to make joint decisions or share information? How much is it to build a sense of community, cooperation or teamwork? What sort of results do you want? Design accordingly.

Preparation

- Are the appropriate people sufficiently informed?
- Is the location and venue conducive to your purpose?
- Does everyone know the starting time?
- Should childcare or help with transport be provided?
- What equipment (eg whiteboard, butchers paper, wall charts, etc) might be needed?
- Are refreshments provided?
- What are you warming people up to thinking about beforehand?
- What should they bring?
- Are appropriate reports prepared and information gathered?
- What might streamline the information sharing and decision-making?
- Do you need to prepares some energizers or lighteners?

Process

A balance needs to be struck between getting through the business (the TASK dimension) and paying attention to the needs of and relationships between people (the MAINTENANCE dimension. What level of formality and structure is actually needed? Who plays what roles? Are these appropriate? Can the roles be rotated? What sort of group agreements do you need to make about the way you will operate together? What sort of group culture are you building?

Practical action

Is it clear what the outcome of the meeting was? Who was going to do what? By when? What sort of records need to be kept? Do you know how people feel about the meetings? Do you do evaluations? When you identify problems, fo some group problem-solving.

Forming an agenda

Source: *No Bosses here: Decision Making and Meetings*

Tips

- Have the agenda set ahead of time. Many groups post a sheet of paper on the wall during the week where people can write in issues as they come to mind.
- Give each person in the meeting a copy of the agenda or have it posted so everyone can see it.
- If people can do any pre-meeting preparation, have them do it.
- Quickly separate accomplished items and announcements from longer discussions
- Prioritise agenda items and set time limits on each
- Make sure the group accepts the agenda.

The six stages of a meeting

Source: Katrina Shields "Making meetings effective"

If you are designing a meeting or thinking about problem solving, each of the following stages need attention. Poor process in any of these areas will impact on the overall effectiveness of the meeting eventually.

Preparation

What can be done beforehand to help the meeting run well? Have you designed and informed appropriately?

Gathering

Allow time for people to interact socially and to catch up with each other. Do new people need to be welcomed and introduced? Sharing food or a drink will relax people and warm up the climate. You may set a gathering time and a meeting starting time.

Orientation

Are introductions around the circle needed? Do you need to restate the purpose of the meetings? In this stage you settle in and consider the tasks ahead. Either some cooperative agenda forming time or an agenda review is needed.

Structuring

This stage is especially important for new or short-term groups. Decisions need to be made about how the group will function – don't assume everyone has the same ideas about this one. What are your group agreements? Who will take what roles? How will they be rotated?

Constructive work

The majority of the meeting time is spent in this stage. If insufficient attention has been paid to earlier stages this part may be interrupted or inefficient. The four P's will have an impact here.

Completion

This may be short but is still important. Try to avoid ragged endings. Do summaries of decisions made and who will do what. Set next meeting time. Conduct a short evaluation, make plans to deal with unfinished business including upset feelings. Have appropriate appreciations been expressed? (including appreciation for attending – it may have been an effort for some.) Can you end on a high or positive note?

The qualities of an effective meeting

Source: Katrina Shields "Making meetings effective"

An effective meeting is one where a good balance is struck between the TASK dimension (getting through the business, achieving the purpose) and the MAINTENANCE dimension (people enjoying themselves, having their needs met, building the group spirit).

It is hard to make the sharp distinctions between these two dimensions as they feed each other, however here are some suggestions:

Task dimension:

- Everyone is clear about what happened, what decisions were made and why.
- The business got finished on time or was appropriately deferred.
- Everyone understood the meeting procedure that was used, and it was appropriate for the purpose of the meeting.
- Everyone understood the information, jargon and abbreviations used.
- Everyone who wanted to was able to have their say to an appropriate level.
- The business was not too rushed or slow.

Maintenance dimension:

- People were treated with equality and respect.
- The group was welcoming and encouraging to new or quiet people.
- The facilitator was reasonably neutral and understood and influenced group process in a positive direction.
- The atmosphere was such that differences were aired, conflict had a chance to be resolved, and an appropriate level of consensus formed.
- There was care and sensitivity to people's different cultural backgrounds (eg. consideration for people from non-English speaking backgrounds).
- People's needs for contact, recognition, enjoyment and inclusion were met.
- The group spirit was built and relationships were maintained or enhanced.