

Meetings That Matter: The Neutral Facilitator Advantage

Have you ever wished you could just get up and walk out of a meeting? If so, join the club.

In our work with clients, from private sector board rooms to public agency work groups, we find that most people have experienced meetings where they felt bored, ignored, annoyed, or all three. Maybe it was because the meeting seemed to lack focus and direction, or maybe felt stressful and tense. Whatever the reason, it can be frustrating for all concerned and even worse if *you* are the one responsible for planning or running it.

Common complaints we hear include, “We meet and meet, but don’t seem to accomplish as much as we should. There’s a lot of talk and then we schedule the next meeting, which we all dread.” Or, “The meetings are uncomfortable. I either feel my input is attacked or not heard at all.” One board member admitted he saw meetings as a “necessary evil.” So how do we accept the necessary part, but transform the “evil” to “valuable?”

An experienced neutral facilitator can transform a dreaded meeting into one of substance and productivity. On balance, a skilled “dialogue engineer” saves money, time, and stress. Before noting the many advantages of this approach, let’s first look at *why* people attend meetings and then *how* those meetings might be improved.

Depending on the subject matter being addressed, participants may meet to exchange information, provide opportunity for dialog and problem solving, track projects, strengthen relationships and promote teamwork, coordinate resources and tasks, and/or maintain accountability.

In a perfect world, every meeting would satisfy all expectations; however, we all know that despite the best-laid plans of mice and managers, meetings can go badly awry. Many fall short simply due to poor planning. Sometimes it becomes obvious only after the meeting has started, that the participants have varying ideas of what the objective is.

Additionally, there is the chance that participants’ underlying *personal* conflicts, agendas, and biases can derail best efforts. A dysfunctional meeting can produce an environment in which participants feel “checked out” and apathetic, not valued, frustrated, angry, or even hostile. An unresolved personal issue can impair a group’s capacity to make important decisions and adversely impact the *organization or project* as a whole. Productivity decreases. Valuable hours are wasted. Confusion compounds.

Meeting organizers often hesitate to address meeting structure and process when issues are burning and tasks pending. A neutral person can help identify, sort and prioritize any number of complications thereby circumventing the need for damage control later. An additional benefit is that the facilitator frees the meeting

planner/manager to fully participate in the process, minimizing distraction and reducing the likelihood that self-interest prevail in an otherwise inclusive experience. -

A skilled “dialogue engineer” helps create an atmosphere where all participants feel comfortable, respected, and heard. This is accomplished by finding ways to determine goals and incorporate the skills and knowledge each person brings to the table. Issues get defined and a standardized procedure for tracking progress developed. And finally, a mechanism for assuring the sustainability of effective meetings is built along with normalizing process models that support the best methods for working as a group on a consistent basis.

Without question, meetings are necessary, but dialogue and tangible outcomes are crucial. Sometimes a group simply needs a tune-up, while others a full overhaul. An experienced, neutral facilitator steeped in the ability to assess needs, clarify expectations, and recommend a process for a specific group can be invaluable. Agendas become more focused, participants more engaged, and outcomes more productive. With less time and resources being wasted, the proverbial dreaded meeting will be much more *worth everyone’s time!*