Meetings are the central way work gets conducted within organizations. On average, people at work spend 37% of their time in meetings.[1] But according to research, up to 50% of that time is wasted.[2] Meetings can range from energizing, creative expressions of a group's highest capacity to a frustrating waste of energy. In many cases, it is the quality of facilitation that will determine this outcome.

In thinking about needs for facilitation, it is important to understand the nature of meetings, as these can vary greatly. Determining factors include:

- Whether group members work together regularly (such as an intact work team or board vs. people who are not part of an ongoing team)
- Size of the group
- Nature of the agenda
- Degree of potentially divisive or conflict-laden issues
- Stakes of meeting (i.e., routine vs. major implications)
- Length of meeting

This paper is about the practices of masterful facilitation that apply to virtually any meeting where work is being conducted.

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

What the facilitator does:

- Confirms and clarifies purpose, goals, roles, and expectations
- Helps create the process by which the group can fulfill the purpose and achieve its goals
- Helps ensure a successful outcome by
    - setting a positive tone
    - maintaining focus
    - encouraging participation
    - managing the flow of the meeting
    - adjusting the process as needed
    - monitoring and managing group dynamics to ensure positive results

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[1] National Statistics Council, quoted in http://e-meetings.verizonbusiness.com/global/en/meetingsinamerica/uswhitepaper.php

[2] http://psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201204/why-meetings-kill-productivity
http://techradar.com/news/world-of-tech/roundup/wasted-time-in-meetings-costs-businesses-26-billion-1081238

The facilitator is committed to the success of the group in meeting its goals.

- The facilitator's success depends completely on the willingness of the group to follow the suggestions and direction of the facilitator.
- The facilitator earns this trust through their ability to act fairly and competently in serving the purpose of the group, the goals of the meeting, and the interests and needs of participants.

Groups must be able to count on the neutrality of the facilitator:

- Facilitators usually do not participate in the content of the meeting while facilitating.
- If a facilitator wishes to voice a personal opinion on content, they should first let the group know they are stepping out of their role as facilitator.
- It is possible, but sometimes a bit complicated, for the actual leader of a group to facilitate. When doing so, the leader should strive to differentiate between their role as facilitator, when they are participating in content, and when they are exercising authority as leader.
- Given the challenges of doing so, leaders may prefer to hand over facilitation duties to someone else, leaving themselves freer to participate in discussions.

There are many styles of facilitating:

- Like other forms of leadership, facilitation is as much about who you are as the tools you use.
- Each facilitator must evolve a style that is natural and authentic.
- Different organizational cultures and different types of meetings will respond better to different styles of facilitation. For example, some groups might thrive with a highly directive facilitator but be frustrated with a relatively-hands off approach. Other groups might react against being too controlled and favor a more laid-back style.

AGENDA PLANNING

The success or failure of many meetings is determined before people ever enter the room. Some of the most important work of the facilitator is in the process of conceiving, convening, and planning a group meeting. Given this, facilitators should:

- Bring their skills and experience to bear in creating the agenda
  or
- Assess carefully before agreeing to facilitate an agenda designed by others.

There are a number of factors to consider in planning for a successful meeting:

Contracting

- Typically there will be a single person or small group of people responsible for the meeting. The role of the facilitator is to serve this group that in this paper we will refer to as the "client."
- Facilitators are engaged because of their expertise in creating and running successful meetings. But final decision-making power about the nature and content of the meeting typically resides with the client.
- Begin by clarifying the purpose of the meeting.
- Then, what are the specific desired outcomes for the meeting? Test for process or developmental outcomes as well as substantive output.
- What would success look like for each of these outcomes? How will you know if the meeting has been successful in meeting these outcomes?
- Don't assume that the presenting reasons for the meeting are the full story. Probe for underlying issues, concerns, hidden agendas, etc.
- What do you need to see in place to feel confident in meeting these outcomes? As the expert in meeting design and facilitation, it is your right and responsibility to only engage in facilitating a meeting that you believe has a reasonable chance of success. Be clear and forthright about what you believe is necessary to achieve the purpose and outcomes of the meeting. The experienced facilitator either advocates successfully for the conditions for success, or chooses not to take the assignment.

Attendees

- How many?
- Who are they?
- Among participants, are there particularly critical stakeholders? Who?
- How well do the participants know one another? What is the overall quality of relationship and trust among participants?

Engagement of key stakeholders

The skillful facilitator ensures that key stakeholders in the meeting have input into creating the agenda. This almost always includes the client, but may extend to other participants as well. Collaborative engagement in agenda-building also helps create ownership of the meeting and its outcomes among more participants, increasing the likelihood of success.

In addition to planning meetings with the client, this may include interviews, surveys or even pre-meetings for diagnostic reconnaissance and to make sure that the agenda well represents the needs and interests of participants.

Establishing outcomes

All meetings need to have clear, agreed upon outcomes. Each agenda item within the meeting should also have its clear outcome(s).

Agendas are often filled with giving updates or reports that don't serve any worthwhile purpose. Too often we see groups using an "interesting" process that doesn't produce a real outcome. We see valuable group time taken up with items that could better be handled outside of a meeting.

The use of the **POP Model**[3] provides a discipline that leads to results-oriented agendas.

POP stands for:
Purpose
Outcomes
Process

To propose an item for the agenda, three questions must be addressed:

- What is the **P**urpose of the proposed agenda item? **(P)**
- What are the specific **O**utcomes we hope to achieve? **(O)**
- Only then do we begin to ask: What **P**rocess should we design to optimally achieve these Outcomes? **(P)**

Using the POP Model helps ensure that meetings produce outcomes that are worth the investment of time and energy.

Timing

Meeting convenors virtually always try to pack too much into the available time. This leads to failure to complete high-priority goals, last-minute scrambles, and/or inadequate time to address follow-up and next steps.

To prevent this, in planning:

- Be realistic in allotting time allocations for agenda items. In the desire to get everything done, people tend to low-ball time estimates. Think of the range of time each activity might take, and then assume it will likely be on the high side of the range.
- Plan for the unplanned. Especially in a full or multi-day meeting, something unexpected almost always comes up. Have a back-up plan: what item will you drop if time gets short? For this reason it is a good idea not to leave one of the most important agenda items to last.

Above all, the overall amount of time allocated for the meeting must be sufficient to achieve the purpose and outcomes. It is your job as the expert in meeting planning to hold the line when the length of the meeting is inadequate to meet the objectives. Either the goals need to be reduced, or the length of the meeting extended.

[3] The POP Model was created by Leslie Sholl Jaffe and Randy Alford

Group Energy

Most agenda planning focuses only on content needs, e.g., prioritizing what to include, the logical order of agenda items, how much time to allot for each item, etc. People responsible for agendas rarely think about individual and group energy, and this is a downfall of many meetings. A wise facilitator can look at an agenda and predict when we are likely to see the phenomenon called “death by agenda.”
For example:

- hours of back-to-back “talking heads” (presentations or panel discussions)
- content-rich topics right after a big lunch or late in the evening
- long discussions sitting in a big circle of 30+ people that create competition for airspace and/or boredom
- finishing a tough agenda item, then launching right into another tough one without a break

To plan for the energy implications of an agenda, try “walking your body” through each step of the agenda. Imagine yourself in the room with the participants, and as you “experience” each part of the meeting, sense what the flow and pacing will actually feel like, and where there may be problems such as energy lags or mental exhaustion, stress at too much being crammed in, boredom, etc.

Some important energy considerations in planning agendas:

- **Participation:**
  We human beings are enlivened by participation. There are real limits to how much information we can passively take in at one time.[4] Liberal use of dyads, triads, and small groups helps groups sustain energy over long periods of time.

- **Shifting modes:**
  People can sustain their attention a very long time if there is a mix of activities and regular shifting of modes. (e.g., Presentation. Small group. Presentation. Physical activity. Challenging discussion. Uplifting exercise, etc.) It can also help to vary communicating through different ‘modalities’ (visual, auditory, kinesthetic).

- **Whole beings:**
  Remember to engage body, heart, spirit as well as head. For example: Sitting for too long dulls energy. One of the best ways to keep energy fresh is to get people up and moving. Another example: Activities that remind people of their purpose and/or evoke their passion for the work will help sustain energy through more mundane elements in the agenda.

- **Care for physical needs**
  Attend well to people’s needs for food and drink. Low blood sugar – either from lack of food or crashes from sugar-rich snacks – can help undermine an otherwise well-planned agenda. Also keep an eye on hydration.

[4] Research shows that most adult learners can stay tuned in to a lecture for no more than 20 minutes at a time, and even less later in programs.

- **Integration time:**
  Just as people need time to digest food, they need time to process and integrate information. Without this opportunity, people get "mental indigestion" and brains begin shutting down.

- **Degree of difficulty:**
  In order to build trust and confidence, it is sometimes better to begin with issues more easily resolved rather than starting with the greatest challenges, It can also be helpful to break down major challenges into a series of smaller, winnable steps.

- **Timing:**
  Mornings are best for mental focus; right after meals is worst. Late afternoons can be sluggish. Evenings, after a long meeting or intense work days, are not great for taking in a lot of content.

- **The physical space:**
  Human energy is significantly impacted by environmental factors such as light, the quality of sound, seating comfort, temperature, and room ambience. Different seating configurations can have a dramatic impact on group energy. For example, a circle of chairs with no desks can enhance a sense of informal collaboration, while seating a panel at the front of chairs placed theatre style tends to discourage participation and interchange.

Attention to energy in planning can make or break meetings. Yet stakeholders often want to pack in too much and frequently don't understand the impact of energy on meeting success. Facilitators often need to negotiate vigorously with meeting planners to ensure a quality agenda supportive of meeting the program goals. You want to position yourself as the expert on what it takes to run a successful meeting and achieve given outcomes.

Preparation for the meeting

When working with new groups

Experienced facilitators know the importance of gathering good intelligence to best serve the group. This is one of the reasons for engaging key stakeholders in meeting planning. Meeting stakeholders also creates an opportunity for new facilitators to build rapport and trust with key individuals in the group.

Anticipating challenges

As a result of the agenda planning process and gathering of information, facilitators can often anticipate possible challenges in the meeting. To skillfully meet these challenges, it may be beneficial to do some work prior to the actual meeting. This is especially true in conflict situations. Some dynamics are better handled not in public. It may be helpful for the facilitator to separately meet with conflicting parties to build trust and provide opportunity for some informal coaching or pre-mediation.

Pre-work

Meeting time is valuable as it consumes human resources at a very high rate. Facilitators need to ensure that time is well-used. Each item on the agenda should be assessed to see what, if any, pre-work would be helpful to make maximum use of time in the meeting.

Prepping the team

In many meetings, participants may be playing roles such as making presentations, facilitating sections of the agenda, leading break-out groups, note-taking, etc. It is wise to check in with people prior to the meeting to ensure that they will perform at the quality needed for success. Make sure to clarify time parameters with presenters, as running over allotted time is a common problem.

Logistics

Walk through the agenda with the person(s) responsible for logistics. You have a lot to track as a facilitator, so you want to ensure that everything is in place to support a successful meeting. You also want to be sure you have confirmed meeting set up and logistical needs such as AV equipment, flip charts, art supplies, etc., well in advance of the day of the meeting. You should also be informed about the participants' access needs, that might require preparation of the physical space, coordination of language interpretation including ASL, or requests around being scent-free, among other things.

Creating expectations

That participants come to meetings with clear and appropriate expectations is an important success factor. In contrast, people arriving to a meeting with differing expectations is a recipe for problems. Therefore, it is generally a best practice to circulate the agenda beforehand. It is wise for the facilitator to review pre-meeting communications before they are sent to participants. Sharing access information about the space and meeting logistics will allow for fuller participation from participants who may be disabled, and provide an opportunity for people to make requests.

Opening the meeting

Research shows that that the outcome of negotiations and difficult conversations can be accurately predicted by watching the first five minutes.[5] The first minutes of a meeting are important. Masterful facilitators take great care in opening meetings.

The Facilitator's state of being

How you show up as a leader and a human being in those first minutes has a lot to do with peoples' willingness to follow your lead – 93% of communication is other than the content of your words.[6] The emotional state of leaders has an enormous impact on the moods of those they lead.[7] As soon as the facilitator begins to speak, their emotional/ energetic state begins to impact the group through the phenomenon of *limbic*

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[5] http://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Publications/Curhan_Thin_Slices_of_Negotiation.pdf

[6] Mehrabian, Albert; Wiener, Morton (1967). *Decoding of Inconsistent Communications.* Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 6 (1): 109–114.

[7] Goleman, Daniel et al, *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge, 2002.

resonance.[8] This is great if you're relaxed and confident, but less beneficial if the group begins resonating with your anxiety. Facilitators should come into the room well-prepared, centered and relaxed, and clear in their purpose to serve the group. Many experienced facilitators have pre-meeting rituals to get grounded before the meeting begins.

Elements of the opening

Openings to meetings may include any or all of the following.

- **Welcome and context setting by leaders**
  It is usually important that the actual leaders or convenors of meetings open the meeting. It is their meeting – not the facilitator's. At a minimum, this usually includes clarifying the purpose and outcomes of the meeting and introducing the facilitator. But this may also include important context for the meeting, history leading up to the meeting, etc.
- **Clarify the purpose and outcomes**
  In order for people to know how to participate constructively, they must understand and be engaged in what the meeting is trying to accomplish. In addition to clarifying the specific purpose of the meeting, it may be important to remind the group of the larger purpose(s) in which this meeting is nested.
- **Clarify the roles in the meeting,**
  including that of the facilitator and any support personnel who might be present.
- **Review the agenda**
  Walk people through the roadmap for the meeting. This helps participants to see how the pieces fit together, and to understand where in the meeting any individual concerns they may have will be addressed. It may also be skillful to review how the agenda was constructed, highlighting how different peoples' input was taken into consideration.
- **Help people get present and/or connected to each other**
  People often walk into meetings still carrying the concerns and energy of wherever they are coming from. It is often useful to help participants get present and ready to engage. We may also want to give people an opportunity to connect with each other as human beings before diving into the work. Many cultures understand the importance of relating as people before jumping into a task. There are many methods for accomplishing this. The choice should be geared to the nature of the meeting as well as the culture of the group. Some common ways of centering and/or bringing people together include:
    - Introductions (if group members don't know each other)
    - Brief personal check-ins: *"How I'm doing..." "A success I've had since the last time we met..." "Something from my personal life…,"* etc.
    - For larger groups, brief check-ins in pairs may serve to help people get present and engaged.
    - People sharing their expectations or hopes and fears for the meeting

[8] "The capacity for sharing emotional states arising from the limbic system of the brain… a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states." **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_resonance**

- The reading of a poem or inspiring quote or passage
- Some moments of silence
- Sharing of personal stories
- A spiritual or transformational practice such as meditation

- **Ground rules/meeting agreements, rules of engagement, etc.**
If groups have existing ground rules by which they operate, it is useful to briefly re-establish these at the beginning of a major meeting. For groups that do not have any rules of the road, again depending on the nature of the meeting, it may be important for either the facilitator to propose some, or have the group generate them. Agreement up front on ground rules supports the group in self-monitoring their behavior, as well as establishing a consensual basis for the facilitator to guide, intervene, and redirect the group.

  NOTE: If you take the time to create ground rules, be sure to use them: check in periodically, use them as an intervention tool, etc.

  A few examples of ground rules:

  - Listen respectfully
  - Confidentiality – what's said here stays here
  - Keep our members/clients/community in the room (i.e., make sure their voices and interests are always represented in our discussions)
  - Bring issues or concerns directly to the people involved.

  It's important that ground rules be owned and actually used to guide participant behavior. It can be useful to create a simple ritual of agreement – e.g., everyone stands or raises hands, or verbally agrees to abide by the ground rules.

The opening does not need to use up a lot of time in the agenda. Depending on the nature of the meeting, the element described here can be very brief or quite thorough. But an appropriate and well-facilitated opening process helps set the stage for a more productive meeting.

Holding the reins

Once the meeting is underway, the facilitator moves the group step by step through the agenda. Even with the best of planning, meetings do (and should) have a life of their own:

- Skillful facilitators find a balance of keeping the group to the agenda, while knowing when to run with the unplanned magic of the moment.
  - If one attempts to control groups too tightly, groups will rebel.
  - If one leaves too much slack in the reins of leadership, groups can become chaotic and inefficient.

- The skillful facilitator *always* keeps their eye on the outcomes.
This is critical. It is the facilitator's sacred duty to keep the group moving towards the outcomes, while supporting emergent and creative ways of meeting those goals.

Remember, the facilitator's job to help the group achieve its goals – not necessarily to complete each agenda item in the original plan. Never lose sight of the goals, but be willing to make continual readjustments to the design and process in order to achieve them.

Tracking the group and the agenda

The facilitator must simultaneously track both the content of group discussions and the process and energy of the group.

Monitoring content

Though usually not actively participating in the actual substance of the discussions, the facilitator must be tracking the content well enough to be continually evaluating:

- Is the process focused on the right content and in the right way to accomplish the desired outcomes?
- Is it clear to members where and how to focus their comments to best achieve the needed results?
- How is the quality of thinking, problem-solving, and decisions? It's not sufficient to merely complete the agenda item. Is the group realizing its highest productivity, quality, and creativity? How can we keep raising the bar on performance?
- Closure
    - What is needed to achieve the outcomes for this agenda item? One of the great sinkholes of meetings is allowing a conversation to go on and on rather than being focused on the needed results. Keep the group focused on what else needs to happen to complete this part of the agenda.
    - Make sure that action items and decisions are recorded.
    - Clarify next steps and accountabilities.

In some situations, it will be important to have someone in addition to the facilitator recording the content of the meeting. This is especially true when generating large amounts of content, complex content, or the output needs to be circulated to those not in the meeting.

Monitoring process and energy

A great challenge for facilitators is, while tracking content, to simultaneously monitor the process and energy of the group:

- **Time**: We need to continually track "real" clock time vs. planned time according to the agenda. (These are often quite different!) It's O.K. to devote more time than planned to an agenda item, but these need to be conscious choices.
- **Participation**: Are some members dominating in an unhelpful way? Do some people seem to be withdrawing? Are there unhealthy patterns of interaction?
- **Collaboration**: Is the nature of the process helping build group cohesion?

- **Authentic and robust dialogue**: Are people saying what they really think and feel? Do people seem comfortable expressing divergence and disagreement?

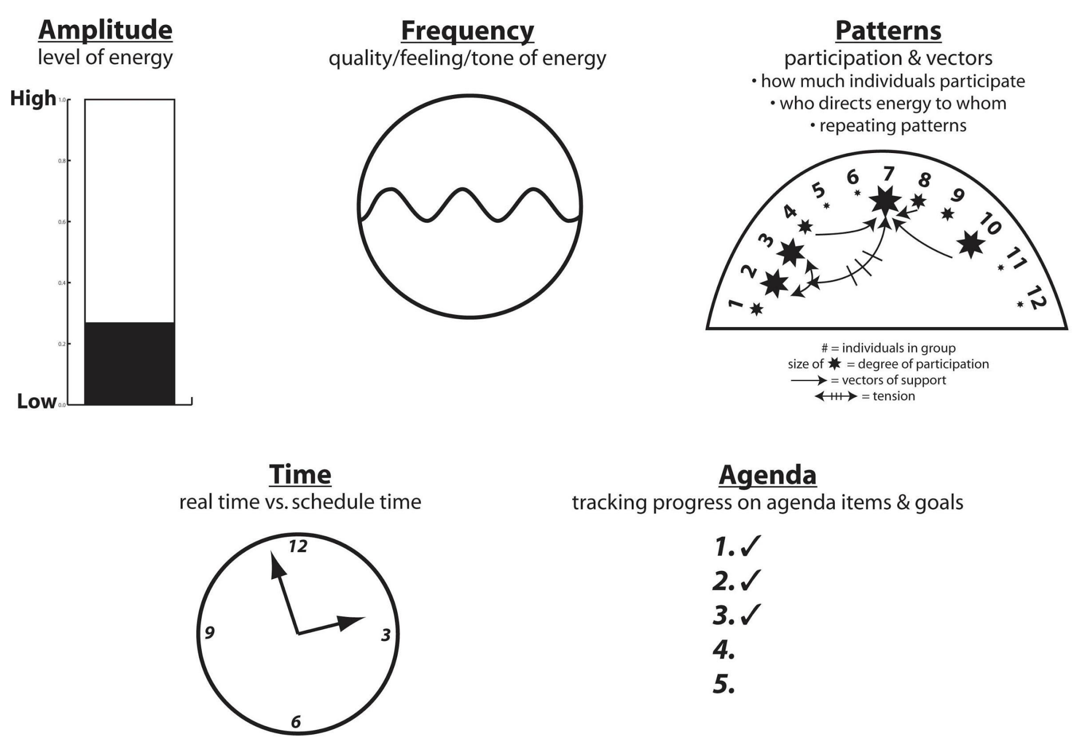
- **Energy**: Is the quality of group energy appropriate to the task at hand?
  - **Amplitude**: How high or low is the group energy? (Good to catch things before energy dips into the low danger zone.)
  - **Frequency**: The energetic feeling tone of the group. Is the quality of energy tense, relaxed, stimulated, stale, harmonious, conflicted, etc.?

Multi-tracking

How can the facilitator manage to stay on top of all these factors?
When flying a plane, there is an instrument panel that helps pilots track the numerous factors relating to the operation and safety of the plane.

It might be helpful to visualize such a dashboard for facilitation:

Group Energy: Instrument Panel



reprinted courtesy of Robert Gass

Facilitators must remind themselves to periodically check their instrument panel. As we become more experienced, this tracking may begin to require less deliberate effort. We start to instinctively notice things that seem unusual or “off.” We may enter a Flow State[9] of heightened awareness where, without much conscious thought, we feel/sense/intuit what’s happening in the group. As a practice, it’s usually wise for facilitators to occasion-ally check in with key stakeholders or the group as a whole and see how the group thinks things are going. These offline caucuses also engage the group’s leaders in maintaining accountability for the meeting’s outcomes.

Interventions

When the group is producing good quality output and participants seem engaged and satisfied, little facilitation may be needed. If facilitators are tracking well the process and energy of the group, they will make ongoing subtle adjustments and minor course corrections, averting the need for major facilitative interventions.

General considerations

- Know your POP for intervening.
  - Why? What is my purpose in intervening?
  - What is the outcome I want to see?
  - What is the best way (process) to achieve this?
- Where to intervene
  In the meeting? Or off-line at a break?
- Timing
  When to intervene? Immediately? At the first opportunity?
  Before the next agenda item?
- Your state of being
  Come from a place of inner resourcefulness. Remember that much of what gets communicated are your non-verbals and your energy.

Your own anxiety about the process or whether or not a group will respond well to your suggestion often evokes resistance. Your centeredness and relaxed authority increases the likelihood that the group will follow your lead.

- Make positive suggestions
  If you choose to make an observation about the group process, it is best to immediately follow this with a clear suggestion of how to get on a better track. Otherwise you are at risk of instigating prolonged and unproductive discussions of which process to use. Avoid these at all costs! Often, any suggestion that everyone agrees upon will work just fine.

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[9] People in the Flow State are “fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity.” Proposed and popularized by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, the Flow State is characterized by “a loss of the feeling of self-consciousness, the merging of action and awareness.” There is complete “absorption into the activity, a narrowing of the focus of awareness down to the activity itself.” We receive “direct and immediate feedback; successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behavior can be adjusted as needed…There is a sense of personal control over the situation or activity.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology)

- If there is resistance, don't be defensive or attached to your proposal. Keep the conversation focused on positive suggestions of how to proceed. Bring the group to agreement on the process as quickly as possible.
- Don't criticize the group.
  Not surprisingly, people will usually get defensive. As facilitator, it is your responsibility to guide the meeting to successful outcomes.

Types of Interventions

There are four varieties of interventions that facilitators can use to direct and redirect the group to successful outcomes:

1) **Restructure process**
2) **Refocus content**
3) **Manage human dynamics**
4) **Shift energy**

1) RE-STRUCTURE PROCESS:

Facilitators can powerfully re-direct the work of the group by shifting the process the group is using for its work. For example:

- reconfigure group formation (breakout groups, sub-groups, dyads, fishbowls, etc.)
- use problem-solving processes (SWOT, mind map, brainstorm, etc., that structure the conversation)
- introduce games and simulations (i.e., processes not directly related to the immediate work content)
- use rituals to facilitate discussion (e.g., talking stick, check ins, etc.)

The key is knowing which process to use to meet the needs of a given situation. It is painfully common to see leaders or groups with limited toolkits trying to use the same structures repeatedly, regardless of their suitability for the task at hand. Going around the circle with each person speaking one at a time would be a poor tool to generate a lot of creative energy and out-of-the box thinking. A brainstorm won't be very effective in a situation where there are strong, unprocessed emotions in the group about the subject at hand.

2) RE-FOCUS CONTENT:

The facilitator can help improve the quality of work by guiding the group in different ways of dealing with the content at hand. Some basic techniques for facilitating content include:

- **Clarify focus**
  One of the facilitator's primary functions is to keep the group focused on the outcomes for the current agenda item. The facilitator is like the conductor of an orchestra making sure everyone is on the same page. Your job is to ensure that each group member understands how to direct their comments to move the work forward. It's also your job to redirect the focus when the conversation starts becoming unproductive. At the same time, you don't want to hold the

reins too tightly in directing the group's focus. Periods of seeming disharmony and chaos may be a critical part of the creative process, and skilled facilitators also make sure not to prematurely try to control the process.

- **Shift topics**
  Facilitators want to stay alert to times when it may be appropriate to shift topics or move on:
  - People aren't seeing continued value in the conversation
  - More information may be needed than is present in the room
  - There may be an intractable disagreement that can't be solved at this level
  - The group may actually be in "violent agreement" and not recognize it
  - There are other more compelling topics on the agenda
  - The group may simply have insufficient commitment to the topic

  In these situations, the facilitator's intervention can be very simple:
  "It seems like it's time to move on. Do you agree?"
  or simply:
  "Why don't we move on?"

- **Sorting**
  Given that a group is filled with individuals with varying perspectives, it's quite common for confusion to arise as multiple agendas start being discussed at once. An important task of the facilitator is to be able to track, discern, and sort these multiple agendas. A mental map of topics to be addressed can then be presented to the group to help generate a plan for moving forward.

  For example:
  "It seems like we need to look at several different dimensions of the proposed changes: the impact on our members, impact on staff, and budget implications. Why don't we take these one at a time?"

- **Reframing**
  Frames are the perspectives through which we view and organize our "reality." The frame a group is using at any given time will determine how the group is processing information. Reframing the content is a powerful facilitation tool. Some examples:
  - **Reframing problems into opportunities**
    The organization has lost funding from a foundation and is facing a potential budget shortfall. The conversation is in the frame of frustration with the foundation and anxiety over what to do.

    REFRAME: *"Given that we can't do anything about this grant, why don't we take some time to look at what we <u>can</u> do? We have been saying for years that we're too foundation-dependent. What about looking at this as a kick in the pants to really invest in both our major donor program and member engagement process?"*

- **Individual perspective to social perspective**
  A woman manager is having a hard time being heard in the senior team meetings. She's feeling badly, and seeing things completely through the frame of her personal insecurities and feelings of inadequacy.

  REFRAME: *"This is not just about one person feeling shy or insecure. There is a gender dynamic here. The management team is mostly male, there's a generally fast-paced, somewhat competitive style to the meetings, and when she does try to speak, her contributions are rarely acknowledged."*

Tips on reframing:

- The energy with which the reframe is delivered is as important as the content in reframing.
- We usually want to begin by acknowledging the validity of the existing frame. If we fail to do this, we are likely to elicit defensiveness or shame. *"I can see how it might feel or look this way."*
- Frames are not the TRUTH.
  Frames are ways of sorting and looking at reality, but not reality. We offer reframes when the existing frames are limiting, in the way of the group achieving best results or not aligned with their own vision and values. As facilitators, we offer possible reframes to see if they might be useful. We're not invested in their being accepted. It's not about our being right, not about our having a superior view on reality.
  "Might it be useful to think of it this way?"
- Here are some typical questions to help groups reframe what's going on:
  - What else could this mean?
  - What potential positive value might there be in this?
  - What is the opportunity here?
  - Is there a different time frame that might be applied to this?
  - Are there other standards of comparison that might be more useful?
  - How would _____ look at this?
  - How could we make this work?

IMPORTANT NOTE: While the language in this section is oriented towards the facilitator, these content moves can also be made by group members. Also, depending on the facilitator's familiarity with the content, you may well need the advice of your primary client or others in the group to help you determine the right content moves.

"Have we discussed this enough?"
"What seems to be the sticking point here?"
"Where do you think we need to go next?"
"Is there another way we might look at this?"

3) MANAGE HUMAN DYNAMICS

The main challenge in meetings is the reality that there is a room filled with human beings – with all of their personalities, differing points of view, emotions, and sensitivities. One of the facilitator's most challenging jobs is managing the potential dynamics that may arise as these human beings interact. These are some of the common areas in which we may need to intervene.

- **Participation**

  One of our jobs is to ensure participation by group members appropriate to the task.

  - Are people with relevant input getting and taking the opportunity to offer it? Many people carry inhibitions around self-expression, especially if groups are large or the tempo of conversation fast and competitive. Special challenges arise when groups are multi-ethnic or multi-lingual. Sometimes the facilitator may need to actively create space and/or invite participation.
  - Contribution to content is not the only criteria for appropriate participation. Sometimes it's important for people to speak as a way of building buy-in to the product.
  - However, it can also be a mistake to insist on equal participation, as this may inhibit authentic energy and creative flow. Sometimes people may appropriately choose not to speak, as they have nothing to add.
  - Are some group members dominating the conversation in ways that inhibit others from participating? It takes a skillful light-but-firm touch to modulate "over-expression" by individual members without causing shame.

- **Miscommunication**

  Given people's different personalities, life experience, and culture, it's not uncommon for challenges to arise simply because people don't understand each other. (I was told about a very frustrating conversation in which for ten minutes one person was talking about "media rights" while the other person kept hearing "meteorites.")

  One of the facilitator's regular jobs is to act as a translator: helping to build bridges between people who are failing to understand each others' communications. For example:

  - "It sounds to me like what she's saying is…"
  - "I think the two of you might actually be in agreement, but are saying it somewhat differently."
  - "I wonder if the two of you are meaning something very different when you use the word _____"
  - I think the *area of confusion is ____"*

- **Disagreement**
  There are two types of facilitator challenges regarding disagreements:
  - o Failure to surface disagreement.
    Sometimes individuals or groups as a whole are reluctant to disagree or even raise contrasting views in meetings. This may have to do with fear of conflict, power relationships in the room, personal style, cultural or group norms, etc. Depending on the situation, there are a range of potential interventions to help make it safe to raise conflicting views:

    "Let's take some time to hear viewpoints that may differ from what's been said."

    "I wonder if anyone is thinking _______."

    "What would a contrarian perspective on this be?"

    "What are five potential shortcomings of the proposal on the table?"

    The facilitator may also need to consider what would make it safe for people to disagree. People may need to hear directly from the leader or other stakeholders that disagreement is welcome. You may sometimes need to talk to people at breaks to support them in speaking out.

  - o The other problem with disagreement is when it devolves into unskillful conflict. People start talking at each other but there's no listening. Different views on content become personalized. People become defensive (or offensive).

    There is an entire body of work on conflict resolution that is far beyond the scope of this paper. But one of the most important interventions a facilitator can make is knowing when to call "Enough!" There are times when further conversation will be of no use, or when two people are at loggerheads and the rest of the group is losing energy. Rather than continuing to seek resolution, sometimes we need to:
    - Take the conflict offline
    - Move on to another agenda item
    - Encourage people to agree to disagree
    - Find another process that shifts the dynamic

- **Difficult individual behavior**
  One of the greatest facilitation challenges is dealing with individuals who are not appropriately managing their own behavior. This might look like people running personal agendas, being too enamored with the sound of their own voice, or being otherwise out of sync with the group process; individuals caught up in strong emotions, violating the explicit ground rules, or engaging in behavior that is off-putting or offensive to others.

  As mentioned before, the challenge is how to intervene in ways that do not shame the individual, yet are effective in dealing with the situation. Giving feedback in private at a break rather than in public is much easier, but often more immediate action is required. Some tips:

- Come from a place of compassion. It's easy to feel frustrated at an individual who is acting in ways that hamper or derail the group process. But if you can keep your heart open while speaking, it is far more possible to give corrective feedback to someone without engendering defensiveness.
- Whenever possible, refer to the ground rules since the individual has already agreed to abide by these.
- Speak only to the behavior.
- Never assume or attribute negative motivation.
- When possible, assume positive intent. Call out the best in people.

  e.g., *"It's clear you feel strongly about ensuring we make the best possible decision. Would you be willing to….?"*
- When possible, emphasize the behavior you do want rather than unduly focusing on what isn't working.

  e.g., *"It would help bring us to closure if you could state more clearly exactly what you would like to see changed."*

  vs.

  "It's hard for the group to come to closure when you won't say what's bothering you about the proposal."

4) SHIFT ENERGY

"ENERGY MOVES."

Facilitators can use their own energy to help shift the group's energy state into one better suited to the work at hand. While this may sound manipulative, good leaders are continually using their voice and energy to move people. While much of this is instinctive, master facilitators are usually very conscious about the impact of their energy on groups and skillful in its use to serve the group process.

- **Principles of successful energy moves**

Conscious choice and focus on serving the group
It is our motivation that distinguishes acts of service from manipulation. When unconscious, we may make energy moves out of our own need for control, lack of trust in the group, or a need to be perceived as a great facilitator. These often backfire, as people usually sense when and where not to trust leaders.

Inner alignment
The power behind energy moves derives from our alignment of mind, heart, body, and spirit. To the degree we are ambivalent or insecure about our interventions, our energy moves will have less impact.

Contact and rapport
People typically need to feel seen, heard, and validated before they are willing to be redirected. In making energy interventions, we always begin by meeting the group right where they are. We call this joining of energy “rapport” or “pacing,” and it is fundamental to masterful facilitation.

Pacing and leading
From this state of rapport, we can begin to move energy. Like a leader in partner dancing, we begin to invite the group to move in a new direction – with clarity and relaxed confidence, staying sensitive to the point of contact between ourselves and the group, our energy is never abrupt, never trying to dominate, intimidate, or push – yet clear and firm.

- **Some typical energy “moves”**

Command
Directly tell people what we want them to do. Our ease and confidence while maintaining good rapport with the group invites people to follow our lead. This important move can easily be undermined by facilitator arrogance or lack of confidence, both of which tend to elicit resistance from groups.

Enroll
In this variation of directing people, we use a strong infusion of positive and engaging energy to “sell” people on our vision of what we want them to do.

Energize
When energy is low, we can directly activate and raise the level of energy of the group through first pacing then raising our own energy level. Again, the pacing is critical – otherwise, people just feel pushed and recoil.

Calm
When the group is agitated we can soothe and relax the group through first pacing then calming with our own energy.

Focus
When group energy is scattered, we first gather and draw together the group’s attention to focus on us, then intentionally redirect it to a new point of focus.

Lighten
In this move, we use our energy to dispel a heaviness or tension, usually through humor, playfulness, or simply our own lightness of being.

These are just a few examples of energy moves. These moves are usually integrated with some kind of content or process intervention. For example:

> When enrolling with our energy, we also want to make a good case why people should follow our direction.
> or
> We might calm with energy, while offering information to the group that is reassuring (e.g., *“We are extending the deadline for the report to Monday.”)*

To make energy move, we obviously need to have a degree of self-mastery over our own emotions and energy. By contrast, in this last example, if we were frustrated about having to extend the deadline, these same words above would agitate rather than calm the group.

Transformational moves

Masterful facilitators can sometimes elicit instant shifts in group energy by shifting the paradigm in which groups are operating. A well-timed and executed reframe is one common example of a transformational move. Here are some other examples:

- **Inspire**
  When groups are dull, unmotivated, stuck, or grumpy, it is possible to instantly move the group to higher ground by calling forth their deeper purpose for the work: what they love, their values, their deepest commitments, etc.

- **Turn into the skid**
  This transformational move is used when challenging dynamics, conflicts, or emotions unexpectedly erupt in the group and it feels like the agenda is going to be derailed. Less experienced facilitators often have the instinct to try to clamp down, to force the group back on track. My wife, Judith Ansara, uses the metaphor of driving on icy roads when the car starts to skid. Experienced drivers know to override the natural instinct to try to turn away from the direction of skid and instead, turn the wheel *into* the skid to regain control of the car. Similarly in facilitation, rather than trying to deny or override difficult dynamics, we sometimes choose to turn into them – to fully embrace the moment and deal positively with the unplanned challenges that are arising.

- **Validating**
  When individuals or groups as a whole are having challenging experiences, the situation is often compounded by people feeling anxious or upset *about* the experience they're having. The deceptively simple act of having their experience validated by the facilitator often has immediate positive impact. This might look as simple as our saying, *"Given the situation, it's completely <u>normal/natural/understandable</u> for you to be <u>feeling frustrated/anxious/upset</u>."*

- **The Bridge of Trust**
  This move is used when gaps of trust exist between members of a group. We create rapport with each of the parties. The parties may not trust each other, but to the extent they begin to feel connected to and trusting of the facilitator, we can become an energetic bridge of trust that begins to span the divide that separates them.

The facilitator vs. leadership

While the facilitator is the guide for the meeting process, it is important to remember that the facilitator is not ultimately in charge. If the meeting is with a team, then there are actual leaders who are ultimately responsible and in charge. For other kinds of meetings there will be convenors or hosts who, in the end, are the people to whom the facilitator is accountable. As facilitators, we are servants to the group and its leadership.

At critical junctures in the process, when facilitators sense that course corrections or significant shifts in the agenda need to be made, we usually need to consult with the decision makers. These can be check-ins at breaks, quick huddles in the room, or audibles in front of the group.

It may also be important to have the leaders of the group participate in or even lead certain sections of the agenda. There can be a tendency for leaders to check out when there is a facilitator handling the meeting. The facilitator's job is to support and strengthen the actual leadership of the group, not supplant it.

Facilitating Phone meetings/video conferencing

Many meetings are held by phone or video conference. Most of the guidelines for meeting planning and facilitation apply, but there are some special challenges for facilitation.

- It's often hard to track what's going on with participants. Facilitators are missing the entire range of visual cues that we depend on for ongoing feedback.
- It's also harder for participants to track what's going on.
- Attention can be erratic. Participants at any given time may be reading email or doing other work.
- Managing the flow of conversation is more challenging. (Though technology like Maestro can be greatly helpful).
- Fewer options exist for organizing participation (though it is now possible to do dyads and breakout groups).

here are some tips:

- Prepare information in advance.
  - Email agenda and materials to participants.
- Ensure equipment is in proper working order.
  - Ensure everyone can see visual presentations, if any (computer screens, projections, etc.).
  - Check in during call to ensure technology is working for participants.
- Know who is present.
  - Keep a list in front of you.
  - Ask participants to introduce themselves at the beginning of the call.
  - Begin to recognize voices.

- Establish a pattern of seeking out opinions and input.
  - If hearing in turn from participants, keep letting people know who will be speaking next so they can be prepared.
- Check in often to ensure participants are following.
- Manage participants needing to leave and rejoin the meeting during the call.
- Use a scribe to capture output on laptop, electronic pad, etc.
  - If appropriate, have them “broadcast” their captured notes for ease of visual review across sites (e.g., GoToMeeting.com, MegaMeeting.com, MaestroConference.com, WebEx.com, etc.)
- Explain any “dead spaces” or silences that may occur.
- Keep a sense of humor. It’s more challenging for these meetings to go seamlessly.

Top 10 Screw-ups

In addition to our discussion of best practices in facilitation, it might also be useful to name some of the common ways we mess up.

1. Engaging in long, long discussions about which process to use.
2. Letting the group go on and on... getting nowhere... painfully watching the energy and life drain out of the group and just letting it drag on.
3. Allowing interactions to become all hub-and-spoke, with you at the center. A concern is raised. You try to fix it. There’s a question. You answer it. There’s a suggestion. You evaluate it.
4. Getting tight and controlling like an insecure substitute teacher... triggering the group into rebelling like unruly school kids... as you get more and more tight.
5. Being unwilling to make a tough but needed confrontation because you’re concerned that people might get upset with you.
6. Allowing a few people to completely dominate the group while others increasingly withdraw.
7. Subtly (or not so subtly) pushing your own point of view while trying to look like you’re facilitating.
8. Allowing time to be completely eaten up on the first two agenda items and never getting to the most important concerns facing the team.
9. Letting one person who’s emotionally triggered derail the entire group and its agenda.
10. We all screw up. The top facilitator screw-up is screwing up, not owning up to it, and trying to make it seem like the group’s failure.

Closing the meeting

Just as the opening of meetings deserves special attention, so does the close. The very last moments of an experience tend to unduly linger in peoples' memory. A ragged ending to what had been a productive meeting can undo much of the good work.

When the last agenda item is finished, there remain a number of possible elements to consider:

- **Next steps**
  Are there clear next steps for all major agenda items covered in the meeting? Is it clear who's responsible for moving things forward? Roles should be clarified, ideally using a tool like the DARCI chart. [10]

  At the end of the meeting, it's often helpful to go back and review all next steps, commitments and deliverables.

- **Celebrate successes**
  People like to feel rewarded for their efforts. The simple but important act of celebrating whatever good work was accomplished is often overlooked – it takes little time, but is a valuable part of closing.

- **Acknowledgements**
  Remember to acknowledge and appreciate those who played important roles in the meeting such as planners, hosts, those providing logistical support, etc.

- **Closure**
  Considering once again group energy, what else will help bring a feeling of closure to the meeting? One example of a highly effective closing is to ask participants to share one positive thing they're taking away from the meeting. We should also pay attention to the very last moment that signals the end of the meeting. Think of how a musical piece typically has a final chord or cadence rather than the just ending abruptly. Examples of how groups mark this completion include everything from applause, cheers, or a rousing call to arms to holding hands, a prayer, or a simple "thank you."

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[10] Sometimes called RACI, the DARCI chart makes explicit the roles of everyone involved in a project:

Decider/delegator**:** holds the ultimate power to approve/veto
Accountable: the single person fully accountable for making the project happen
Responsible: all those responsible for actively working on the project
Consulted: those from whom input will be solicited
Informed: those to be kept apprised of relevant developments

To learn more, see: *Tools for Transformation: DARCI Accountability Grid at www.stproject.org*

After the Meeting

Depending on the nature of the engagement, any of the following items may be useful as part of closure and follow-up:

- Debrief with client(s)
- Formal evaluation by participants
- Coordinate any follow-up and next steps by participants
- Complete any deliverables to which you may have agreed: meeting notes, recommendations, etc.

In Conclusion

Facilitation is more art than science. The principles and approaches discussed in this paper are designed as a helpful guide, but facilitation is not formulaic. As important as knowledge and experience is our ability to pay attention – to be truly present with people and to be in tune with the unique unfolding of life in the moment. This – and our own emotional maturity, our self-confidence, and our humility – serve as the essential foundation of transformational facilitation.

Our craft is one of servant leadership, and we do our work through guiding, advising, influencing, and modeling rather than the direct exercise of power. Yet, we are invaluable guides and potent catalysts for helping groups to achieve their dreams.

