

# Facilitating Effective Meetings



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## Role of the Facilitator

According to Merriam-Webster's definition, *facilitate* means to make something easier; to help something run more smoothly and effectively. The role of a meeting facilitator is to ensure that all the elements of a meeting will run seamlessly, including logistics, processes, and participation. A good facilitator can be the key to a rich and productive meeting. The facilitator cannot – and should not- control the content of the meeting. Rather, s/he should approach the meeting understanding that the participants have entrusted him/her with safeguarding an environment that encourages inclusion, comfort, and clarity, all of which will bring about effective communication and understanding – with ease. Let's look at some of the elements of good facilitation.

### Why it Matters

*Setting up a meeting is only half the battle; making that meeting go well requires good facilitation! A good facilitator maintains an environment where opinions are expressed and people are heard. When the elements are in place, participants are engaged, communications are effective and objectives are accomplished, then you can be confident that a meeting was worth everyone's time and effort.*

## How do I Make a Meeting Run Smoothly?

If you happened to be the person who planned the meeting, you're already a step ahead of the game as you come in with a very clear understanding of what needs to be done; now your focus is on how to do it.

## 1. Room Comfort

Making meeting participants “feel at ease” will set the tone from the start. Use the following list to remind you of some elements that will help everyone feel welcome: Check the room temperature and restroom locations.

Have beverages (coffee, tea and water) and perhaps some snacks or lunch for longer meetings.

Have comfortable seating and tables available and set up in whatever configuration will be most beneficial to the type of meeting: classroom style for a presentation or round tables for discussions.

Ask in advance for any necessary accommodations which your participants might need.

## 2. Equipment, materials and supplies

Some of this preparation you should have done in advance but plan to get to the meeting site with sufficient time to double check that the audio visual equipment is in working order and display or distribute any handouts and any other supplies – writing implements or notebooks – that may be needed.

## 3. Opening the Meeting

A best practice of effective meetings is to make sure they start on time – and as facilitator you hold the key to making this happen. Habitually giving people “time to arrive” will begin to erode the true starting time of a

meeting so be especially mindful of this when conducting recurring meetings. Start within a few minutes of the start time, even if not all participants are there. If participants don’t know each other, use this time for introductions but if it’s a group that works together regularly, get started with a review of the meeting’s agenda, purpose and expected outcomes and move on to the first item on the agenda so all know you value their time.

Setting ground rules at the start of a meeting could help minimize disruptions later on. Ask participants to provide meeting behavior expectations, such as: agreeing on turning off cell phones; not interrupting others when they are speaking; or establishing how the group will deal with a discussion that has gone off course. As a facilitator you want to be especially mindful that these agreements are followed. But don’t think you have to do this on your own – read on!

## 4. Assign Tasks

A good way to increase group participation and accountability for supporting the meeting process is to assign duties. You may consider asking someone to be: timekeeper (to track that the meeting is sticking to the agenda's time allotments); note-taker (to record discussions and send out a post-meeting summary with any follow-up actions and their champions); ground rules overseer (to remind others as needed); presenter; or even facilitator.

A group leader might choose to delegate the facilitation of a meeting to someone else if s/he intends to participate in discussions without exerting additional power or influence. Consider also that letting team members perform the role of facilitator (with proper guidance in advance) allows them to develop important skills and may even change participation dynamics if employees from all levels are given the opportunity to steer conversations.

## 5. Encourage Participation

As facilitator, you are not passively sitting in a meeting while others are talking – you must remain engaged in the process (as well as the content) of the meeting and ensure that all participants are involved. Here are some ways to accomplish that:

- a. Generate discussion by asking open ended questions like: What is your reaction to this idea? How do you reach that conclusion? What thoughts did this generate in your mind?
- b. Broaden participation by asking: How do these ideas sound so far? What else should be considered that has not been brought up?
- c. Encourage specific participation from those who may have a tendency to remain silent. Watch for body language that may indicate that someone disagrees or may have an idea to contribute. Invite their voices to be heard by addressing them by name and asking: How do you feel about this? What's on your mind?
- d. Ask for clarification when a point has not been clearly expressed and ask: Can you give me an example of what you mean? I'm not sure I understand; can you expand on that? Let me reword what I think you said and you tell me if I got it right or not.

## 6. Staying Focused

Meetings that don't allow full communication or derail from the topics at hand can be very frustrating. Follow these guidelines to keep meetings on track:

- a. Offer support by allowing participants to express their point of view or consider restating what they said to make sure you, and others, understood their point of view.
- b. Alternatively, limit participation by redirecting a conversation. Consider asking if anyone has a comment to add, especially if they have not yet spoken.

- c. If you suspect that a meeting will bring some potential difficulties, anticipate how you might deal with them if they occur. Will the group discuss a polarizing topic? Is any one participant likely to try to monopolize the talking? Or, perhaps, alienate others?
- d. One great way to take back the reins and refocus a discussion starts with: “Let me try to summarize what I’ve heard thus far.”
- e. Consider having a “parking lot” of ideas that may be important for discussion but not during this particular meeting. Ask the note-taker to keep track of them for future consideration.

## 7. Discarding the Agenda

As much as you might want to stick to your original plan, a good facilitator is aware that sometimes meetings don’t evolve as expected. You must remain flexible to discard the agenda when an item is more urgent or more complicated than anticipated or when there is new information or a new situation that affects items on the agenda. Finally, when the group is not functioning effectively (perhaps due to extreme differences of opinion or inappropriate behavior) you may need to call for a break or altogether end the meeting.

## 8. Closing the Meeting

Don’t allow a meeting to continue just because you booked the room for a full hour!

Close the meeting when:

The goals and objectives have been accomplished (agreements reached, agenda items covered)

In order to proceed, the group needs more information or the input of others who are not present

But don’t just let people go without summarizing what was discussed including how it related to the stated objectives and delegating any follow-up or action items. Of course, make sure to end on time!

## 9. After the Meeting

What happens after the meeting is often an overlooked step but perhaps one of the most important. As facilitator, you should see to it that meeting minutes are

distributed to all participants (and perhaps any others who would need to be informed of the discussions or decisions that took place) within 3-4 days. Also, make sure to follow- up on any action items or specific decisions that need to be acted upon.

## It's an Art!

Just like creating art, effective meeting facilitation uses skill and imagination (as well as keen observation and timely intervention) to promote the expression of important ideas or feelings. The job of a facilitator may be to make things easy but it is not an easy job. However, when you take it seriously and succeed at it, meeting participants will not only recognize but be very grateful for your efforts!

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### References:

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