

8 Expert tips for facilitating better meetings

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Facilitating a meeting is part art, part science. The best meeting facilitators have a quirky blend of charm, insights, humor and charisma. Some are just born with an ability to focus a group and get results—the rest of us have to work at it.

While some of the tips may seem obvious, being reminded of the basics may make a positive difference in the outcome of a meeting.

1. Make sure there is a clearly stated objective or purpose in the meeting and an expectation of what the outcomes and aligned deliverables will be.

This is elementary, but way too many meetings are ambiguous. Meetings without clearly stated objectives are more easily hijacked by people with soapbox platforms and grievances. The meetings become counterproductive by getting a team wrapped up in side topics and losing focus on the real reason for the meeting.

2. Agree on time blocks and keep the team moving—stay on time.

Setting time limits forces a guardrail for the group and offers a way to corral discussion and debate. A timeline keeps the group moving versus getting them caught up in the endless discussion of fruitless topic. For example, the facilitator may say, “We’re going to present the material, and then we’ll have 15 minutes to discuss. At the 15-minute mark, we move on.” Some groups may consider setting a timer that dings loudly.

3. After each time block, recap the discussion and restate any decisions.

During each recap, the facilitator should highlight alignment in the meeting conversations.

4. Before moving on to a new subject, make sure the group comes to some alignment.

Two or three players dominate most meetings. The facilitator should ask some of the less vocal members of the team for their thoughts. Some of the best ideas come from the people who are observing and processing the information, but not always vocal.

5. Watch for rabbit holes.

When Alice fell down the rabbit hole, she was freefalling and became stuck. In a meeting, the facilitator should watch for the topics that always sidetrack the group and turn into a downward spiral of restated rehashed topics about what isn’t working and what needs to change.

6. Watch for team member’s soapbox.

Different members of the team revisit many of the same issues over and over again. Use the time restrictions to help manage a person who has stepped up on a soapbox. The best facilitators, when laying the ground rules for the meeting, say, “I have the right to shut you down. If you get on a soapbox, I will call timeout and move the conversation forward.”

7. Use the parking lot to “park” rabbit holes, soapbox topics and reoccurring themes.

People need to be heard, but in order to make progress, the facilitator and group have to agree to table certain issues. For example, a facilitator may say, “We hear you. We’re going to park that issue over here for now. We will address it, but not right now.”

8. Anticipate some of the issues and think about ways to move people from opinions and value statements to discussions about the facts and options.

Good meeting facilitation preparation almost takes as much time as the meeting. The facilitator anticipates that some people are going to get on a soapbox or go down a rabbit hole. A facilitator has to understand the frustrations some group members may be feeling and honestly ask, "I hear you. What do we want to do about it?"

This can be the most critical step. The facilitator wants to anticipate the issues that are going to show up and have a tool or mechanism to solve it and move on.

9. Ask someone to scribe during the meeting.

Writing down peoples' thoughts, observations and statements can be helpful later in the meeting or on another occasion. On a flipchart, post people's comments, key points and topics so the group can easily recap. Plus, the people know they've been heard.

10. Guide the group to discuss what the next steps are.

At the end of the meeting, a strong facilitator will recap any decisions, actions to be done, owners and timing.