Meetings & Decision-Making

Introduction

Good meetings do not happen by chance. This document outlines the key elements that we use to make meetings go well.

Good meetings are important – they empower, enliven, and inspire us. Poor meetings, by comparison, are unfocused, dysfunctional, boring, confusing, and waste our time.

Good meetings are essential to our practice – they are one of the ways we get work done, they are at the heart of our communication with each other, and they help develop and refine our culture.

Elements of a Good Meeting

Meetings are generally efficient, productive, inclusive, and satisfying when:

- Everyone has had sufficient time to review the agenda and prepare for what will be discussed

- Agreement on the "rules of the road" is confirmed before beginning

- The meeting begins with a check-in to warm up participants

- The agenda and goals of the meeting are clear to everyone

- Everyone remains focused on the task at hand

- Everyone's input is heard and acknowledged

- Decisions are made which are agreeable to all and which do not result in a dissatisfied minority

- Everyone is clear about what has previously been decided and what is currently being decided

- Everyone is clear about necessary follow-up at the end of the meeting

- The meeting includes time to offer appreciations

The Facilitator

The facilitator leads the meeting by helping the group to clarify and move through its agenda in a clear, respectful, and timely manner. The facilitator serves as a "meeting navigator." Typically, a facilitator:

- Develops the agenda for the meeting in consultation with all participants or representatives

- Makes sure the meeting space is in order (chairs, lighting, sound, flip charts, etc.)

- Convenes and adjourns the meeting in a timely manner

- Helps the group move through its agenda, focusing on one item at a time

- Makes suggestions to encourage an open and balanced flow of discussion

- Helps the group gain deeper understanding, by asking questions such as *What made you say that?* or *Can you say more about what you mean?* or *Thanks for that suggestion; what benefit do you think would come from doing that?*

- Intervenes when there are interruptions, distractions, or overly long comments

- Asks clarifying questions, and makes suggestions

- Listens carefully, occasionally summarizes points of agreement and points of divergence, and asks for reactions to the summary so the group can move ahead

- Assists the group through its established decision-making process

- Confidently summarizes for the group where they have arrived, and seeks confirmation by asking *Does that sound good?* or *Did I get that right?*

- Helps the group plan follow-up, clarifying who, what, when, and where

- Makes sure that the minute-taker has a record of all action items

- Relinquishes facilitator responsibilities to another when they need to contribute to the meeting content in a way that makes it difficult to be fully attentive to the meeting process.

The Meeting Participant

Every meeting participant is either a beneficial or detrimental force. No one can simply "attend" a meeting. To improve the quality of the meeting, a participant:

- Reviews all meeting materials prior to arriving at the meeting

- Arrives in time for the beginning of the meeting

- Assists the group in staying focused on its agreed agenda

- Maintains awareness of the meeting process (tone, timing, fairness, efficiency, etc.)

- Participates fully in discussion, being mindful to keep comments brief so that all have the opportunity to participate

- Is solution-centered, but is not attached to any one particular solution

- Is open to fairly examining all the pros and cons

- Listens carefully and respectfully when others are speaking, especially when others are expressing different views

- Voices concerns in a manner which invites constructive response and is respectful of the opinions of others

- Understands and fully participates in the decision-making process used by the group

The Agenda

A meeting agenda is an outline of what items will be discussed by the group and the order of discussion.

- Prior to the meeting, the facilitator develops this plan in consultation with meeting participants or representatives. This advance preparation reduces the likelihood that a meeting will get bogged down by too much work, unforeseen issues, or vague topics.

- At SMCo, agendas are distributed to all meeting participants prior to meetings.

- When the meeting begins, the agenda is reviewed and adjusted by the participants. The group then proceeds with this roadmap, making additional adjustments as necessary.

The Minutes

Minutes are the written record of the meeting.

- They identify the name of the group meeting, when and where the meeting was held, who attended the meeting, who was absent, and the minute-taker.

- Minutes are not a transcript of everything said, but a concise summary of key points raised, decisions made, next steps, doers, and deadlines.

- Minutes should use polite and clear language, and acronyms should be avoided.

- In order to ensure accuracy, minutes are typically reviewed at the following meeting of the group, at which time corrections can be noted for the record.

- At SMCo, minutes should be distributed to meeting participants within 24 hours of the meeting, if possible.

Decision-Making

Who makes decisions?

Our management and governance system establishes what decisions are made by whom (Owners, Board of Directors, Leadership Team, etc.).

Why do we prioritize consensus decision-making?

- In order to make good decisions – ones that are widely supported and based on the best thinking that each of us has to offer – we work to build consensus.

- Although many organizations make decisions by majority-rule, that process often squelches creative thinking and leaves a minority dissatisfied.

- Making decisions by consensus sometimes requires more effort, but we have found that the process and results are better for us as employees, and better for SMCo.

What do we mean by consensus?

- Consensus is a process of synthesizing the wisdom of all the participants into the best decision possible at the time.

- It is not necessarily unanimous agreement and, in fact, participants may consent to a decision they disagree with.

- The root of consensus is consent, which means to give permission or approval.

- Consensus is a type of accommodation where all agree to something that they feel is best for the group. It includes supporters of a position, those who don't have a strong opinion either way, and those who don't fully support the position but don't have enough of a problem with it to stand in the way.

How do we reach consensus?

The process of reaching consensus is guided by the facilitator and involves the following steps.

- <u>Presentation:</u> A group member presents a proposal, usually with background information.

- <u>Discussion:</u> The group analyzes and clarifies the information presented.

- <u>Ideas:</u> Ideas are offered, reconfigured, and synthesized.

- <u>Testing:</u> The facilitator tests for consensus. "Is there anyone who does not approve of the group proceeding in this way? Does anyone have any serious concerns regarding this suggestion?"

- <u>Concerns:</u> If one or more group members have outstanding concerns, the concerns are clarified and discussed. The group works to shape a creative solution that addresses these concerns, or the group might ask for a new proposal to be brought to the next meeting. As a solution emerges, the facilitator again tests for consensus.

- <u>Consensus:</u> When everyone consents to the proposal, the group then clarifies how the decision will be implemented (who, what, when, how, etc.).

How can someone support consensus if they have a serious concern?

- A central element of the consensus process is the group's careful consideration of individual concerns. Concerns are not stumbling blocks, rather they are building blocks for crafting a decision which is wise and widely supported.

- If someone has a genuine concern, they should raise it for consideration and then work with the group to explore creative options. If the group does not adequately address the concern, one has the power to withhold consent, thereby requiring the group to continue looking for a more acceptable course.

- Most group members, however, are able to support the group by offering some form of consent. Consider this range of options:

  - <u>Endorsement</u> ("I like it.")

  - <u>Agreement, with reservations</u> ("I can live with it.")

  - <u>Stand aside</u> ("I don't like this, but I don't want to hold up the group.")

  - <u>Will consent if future reconsideration is built-in</u> ("I want to include a sunset clause, or a trial period.")

  - <u>Formal disagreement, but willing to consent</u> ("I want my disagreement noted in the minutes, but I will support the decision.")

  - <u>Block</u> ("I do not consent this proposal.")

- Consensus builds relationships between people and improves group dynamics.

- Consensus agreements tend to enjoy broader support and require less enforcement.

- Consensus moves us toward doing what is best for the common interest, generally prioritizing the good of the whole over any one individual.

What happens if the group cannot reach consensus?

Since it is not always possible to gain the consent of every group member, we have two alternatives.

- <u>Further Exploration:</u> The group decides to take more time to think, discuss, or research before reconsidering the matter at a later date. (One process we use when faced with a difficult decision is to make a decision, sleep on it, and then revisit it at a subsequent meeting. Any meeting participant may call for this procedure.)

- <u>Backup Voting Procedure:</u> The group establishes a modified majority-rule voting procedure for use in such situations. (The SMCo bylaws provide that if we cannot reach a decision via consensus, then a decision can be made with a supermajority vote of 75%. Any meeting participant can call for a vote.)

So, why do we make decisions by consensus?

- Consensus gathers the experience and wisdom of all group members.

- Consensus makes a genuine effort to identify and address all significant concerns.

- Consensus values creative solutions.

SMCo Meeting Reminders

To help make our meetings more efficient, productive, and satisfying . . .

Before the Meeting

- Do your homework. Read your materials in advance.

- Don't come with "the plan." Come with "an idea" or "a proposal." See where the group takes it.

- Don't own ideas. Be ready to give them away to the group.

- Arrive and get settled early enough so the meeting can start on time.

During the Meeting

- Help the group stay focused on the agenda.

- Help the group create space for everyone to participate.

When Listening

- Be attentive and gain understanding of what others are saying.

- Be patient and respectful.

- Accept that "information" comes in many useful forms – facts, opinions, hunches, ideas, feelings, mistakes, and silence.

When Speaking

- Be concise.

- Express one idea at a time.

- Use "I" statements to define your needs. Own your feelings.

- Give the reasons behind your thinking.

- Be solution centered.

- Take a dose of humility.

When Deliberating

- Take a long-term view.

- Be open to outcome.

- Don't lobby your idea.

- Don't set limits.

- Look fairly and equally at all pros and cons, and encourage others to do the same.

- Learn when to let go.

After the Meeting

- Evaluate: *What worked well?* and *What might we do differently?*

- Assign commitments: *Who's doing what, by when?*

- Follow-up on commitments assigned to you.

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