The Project Meeting Facilitator

Tammy Adams, Chaosity LLC
Jan Means, Resource Advantage, Inc.

Introduction

According to a study performed by MCI (1998), U.S. organizations hold approximately 15 million meetings per day. That translates to around 61 meetings per month for most professionals. Whether attending in person, via teleconference, web meeting or video conferencing, 92% of the meeting attendees felt that meetings gave them an important opportunity to contribute. So, regardless how we feel about them, it looks like meetings are here to stay.

However there's always room for improvement. A 2004 survey commissioned by IMS (Interactive Meeting Solutions, Inc.) of over 1,200 professionals nationwide revealed the following insights into meeting practices:

- 55% of meetings are dominated by one or two people
- 32% of people feel they could get fired for speaking the truth in a meeting
- 39% of decisions are made once the meeting is over
- 80% of the discussion is about things people already agree on

Can you relate to these results? Have you ever wondered how the meeting got away from you? You had an agenda and an objective, but somehow things got off track. Have you ever tried to get a particularly vocal team member to be brief or a quiet team member to get engaged? Ever wondered how to get decisions made (without making them yourself)? Ever thought you had agreement only to find out you were talking about different things? If any of these scenarios sound familiar, you've experienced some of the difficulties around managing meetings and the group dynamics that occur within them.

The Project Meeting Facilitator

The Project Manager as Facilitator

"Facilitation is like dancing. If your mind wanders, you miss the rhythm and trip." (Hunter, Baily & Taylor, 1998, p. 37)

Project meetings are the necessary bane of a Project Manager's existence. In an informal survey of our clients, we found that Project Managers spent over ½ of their time in project-related meetings. In most of those meetings the Project Managers was expected to perform the role of facilitator; however, the majority of those surveyed had not received any type of formal training in the discipline of facilitation.

What is a Facilitator?

Meeting facilitation is a structured way to help people reach common understandings and solve problems. It's a skill, a process and an art. We all use this skill in some form or another in our daily lives. In fact, numerous professionals refer to themselves as "facilitators".

- Trainers, teachers, and instructors facilitate learning.
- A master of ceremonies (MC) facilitates the event.
- A mediator facilitates the negotiation and agreement between two parties.
- A coach facilitates personal growth.

For this workshop, we'll be discussing how to apply facilitation to project meetings in order to help project teams achieve a specific goal or build a specific project deliverable.

Sometimes it helps to further clarify a term by defining what it IS NOT. So, in that vein, the type of facilitation we're discussing is not:

- A methodology, but rather a set of skills and techniques that can be applied to both individual and group interactions.
- Just an application of techniques. Those techniques must be combined with an appreciation of the situation and people involved.
- Not about presenting knowledge or giving advice about the subject being discussed. Instead, it's about guiding that discussion to ensure all parties are engaged in the process. It's not
- Is not focused on creating "warm & fuzzies", but is focused on achieving an objective.
- Is not constrained to following the letter of the agenda, but must be flexible to adjust with the needs of the group and yet achieve the meeting objective.

Good facilitation is definitely a balancing act. (Exhibit 1)

Exhibit 1 –The Facilitator Balancing Act

The Facilitator is the person who crafts the agenda and determines the activities necessary to achieve the meeting objectives. The facilitator then guides the group through the process, managing group dynamics and adjusting the flow as needed. Finally, the facilitator is responsible for delivering documented meeting results – whether it be meeting minutes, project deliverables such as a Project Charter or Business Requirement Document, or process/system/data models.

However, the facilitator does not act as an island unto himself. He or she works closely with the project sponsor and project manager to understand objectives, participants, and meeting deliverables as they plan, deliver and document the project meeting.

What Skills are required to be an Effective Facilitator?

Just like the Project Management Professional (PMP®), there is a competency certification process for Facilitators. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has identified six core competencies, which are summarized in the table below. (Exhibit 2)

Facilitator Competency	Evidence of the Competency
1. Ability to create collaborative client relationships	▪ Developing working partnerships ▪ Design and customize work sessions to meet client needs ▪ Manage multi-session events effectively
2. Ability to plan appropriate group processes	▪ Select clear methods and processes that - Foster open participation with respect for client

Facilitator Competency	Evidence of the Competency
	culture, norms and participant diversity - Engage the participation of those with varied learning / thinking styles - Achieve a high quality product / outcome that meets the client needs ▪ Prepare time and place to support group process
3. Ability to create and sustain a participatory environment	▪ Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills ▪ Honor and recognize diversity, ensuring inclusiveness ▪ Manage group conflict ▪ Evoke group creativity
4. Ability to guide a group to appropriate and useful outcomes	▪ Guide the group with clear methods and processes ▪ Facilitate group self-awareness about its task ▪ Guide the group to consensus and desired outcomes
5. Ability to build and maintain professional knowledge	▪ Maintain a base of knowledge ▪ Know a range of facilitation methods ▪ Maintain professional standing
6. Ability to model a positive professional attitude	▪ Practice self-assessment and self-awareness ▪ Act with integrity ▪ Trust group potential and model neutrality

Exhibit 2 –Facilitator Core Competencies (The International Association of Facilitators, 2001)

In addition, understanding your own communication style and personal preferences are key to being an effective facilitator. Various types of testing tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®), the DiSC® Profiling system, and various communication style indicators are helpful in making you more self-aware and more aware of the preferences of others.

Managing Dual Roles – PM & Facilitator

We are often asked whether Project Managers should play the role of meeting facilitator. Optimally, the answer would be "no". A key capability of the meeting facilitator, as we have described the role, is that of neutrality. Project Managers have a stake in the outcome of the project, so objectivity isn't always possible. However more and more organizations are now expecting Project Managers to be skilled facilitators. Whether it's due to limited resources or other factors, Project Managers are frequently finding themselves in situations where facilitating the meeting is not an option, but a requirement.

When you're faced with the need to facilitate a meeting, ask yourself the following questions to determine whether you can facilitate the meeting or need to get an objective third party to facilitate it.

- Can I remain objective about the issues being discusses during the meeting or will I to voice my opinions?
- Can I allow the team to make decisions that are contrary to my opinion on this topic?
- Am I able to use my knowledge around this topic to ask questions rather than suggest solutions?
- Will I be able to manage the group dynamics (treating all parties as equals) without fear of reprisal to my career?
- Am I able to guide the discussion rather than dictating what needs to happen?
- Will I be able to handle challenges to the process and/or agenda without taking it personally?
- Can I focus on the meeting process rather than contributing to discussion?

As a standard rule-of-thumb, playing the dual role of Project Manager and Facilitator is easier when you're dealing with meetings that:

- Are repetitive or in a standard format
- Are short and focused.

- Have a clear meeting purpose, objectives and agenda.
- Do not require discovery, debate or complex thinking.

When is Facilitation Most Helpful?

Every meeting will have a facilitator – whether by intent or default. However there are some situations where an objective, experienced facilitator (either outside your project or organization) should be engaged. An experienced facilitator will be most valuable when:

- There is extreme passion or discord around topics.
- Meeting is lengthy or complex.
- There are challenging group dynamics (i.e., participants who dominate and intimidate others, etc.).
- The meeting or its outcome is highly political.
- There are known rivalries between organizations attending the meeting (and the internal resource has to take sides).
- The meeting requires specialized modeling, diagramming, or analysis techniques.

Techniques to Keep the Team on Track

Keeping the team focused

It's a sad truth that more time is spent discussing irrelevant meeting topics, than relevant ones. Changing that trend requires the use of facilitation techniques that will refocus tangent discussions while keeping the group engaged and motivated. Three of the most common focusing techniques are the use of Objectives, Action Items and the Parking Lot.

Objectives

Never hold a meeting without defining and communicating the reasons or purpose of the meeting. Not only do the objectives set the tone of the meeting, they are also a handy tool for keeping discussions focused during the meeting. Use them as a measuring stick for every conversation to see if it has value.

In situations where you're unsure if the conversation is necessary, ask the team to explain how the conversation is relevant to the objectives. If it's not, list the topic in the Parking Lot for future use and move on.

Action Items

Action Items are tasks that need to be completed after the meeting. Each Action Item must have an owner (one person, not multiple) and a due date. Capture an Action Item when…

- A decision can't be made without additional information.
- More thought or work is required to finish a task.
- When additional people need to give input or validate information, but they are not available.

This technique helps keep the team focused by removing discussion about things that can't be resolved in the meeting, while ensuring that follow up occurs. However, be careful not to use Action Items to postpone tasks that are difficult, but could really be completed during the meeting.

Parking Lot

The Parking Lot is a temporary storage place for ideas, concepts, desires, and thoughts that are tangential to the objectives of the meeting. As these "off topic" items pop up, write them down on a flipchart page labeled "Parking Lot". If you simply try to ignore them, they will keep coming up throughout the meeting. By writing these items down the meeting participants feel that they have been heard and can move on to other thoughts. You may want to include these Parking Lot items in an Appendix of the meeting documentation.

Managing group momentum and dynamics

Sometimes meetings get stuck. You may have very vocal participants who want to share their opinion on everything or conversely, timid participants unwilling to speak up. Team members may chase their tail on topics without every finding closure or moving forward. All of these situations will ultimately affect the success of your meeting. So manage these dynamics by using your Agenda and Ground Rules to keep the team moving. Apply time-boxing to ensure that discussions lead to action and use the nominal group technique to get equal participation from all team members.

Agenda

Agenda's are a common meeting tool. A good Agenda should provide a high-level list of activities that will enable the team to achieve the meeting objectives. In addition to providing the meeting roadmap, it can also be used as a motivational tool. Refer to it frequently to check-off the items that have been completed. This will reinforce what's been accomplished so far and keep the momentum moving forward.

The Agenda can also be used to manage conversation. If the team begins to discuss topics that are scheduled for later in the meeting, refer to the Agenda and ask them if the conversation can be postponed until then. Offer to capture a few relevant ideas in the Parking Lot to make sure you don't forget to discuss them.

Ground Rules

These rules set the stage for how the team will interact during the meeting. They enable the Facilitator to remind the group of their agreements when they lose focus or need to be re-grounded in acceptable behaviors. We recommend that you come into the meeting with a set of standard Ground Rules and ask for the groups' approval rather than creating them from scratch with the team.

Time-Boxing

Time-Boxing is a great technique to use when the team can't seem to reach closure on a topic or decision. When you sense that group is struggling, announce that they have X more minutes of discussion before they need to make a decision about the topic. If a decision cannot be reached within that timeframe, ask the team to define what they need in order to make that decision, assign an action item to perform the stated task and move on.

Nominal Group

This technique evolved from community action groups working in intercity Detroit in the 1960's. Large neighborhood groups would often get together to discuss and protest actions taken by community or city officials. Because the topics were so controversial, the resulting discussion would be heated, chaotic, and unproductive. So the managing team decided to gather input by having folks write down their thoughts individually; then share them by going around the room one-by-one. Comments from other members of the group were not allowed and discussion did not occur until all thoughts had been gathered. This equalized participation and minimized the risk of more vocal members dominating the meeting. In fact, the term "nominal" means "in name only" thereby labeling the technique as one very effective with groups of people who have been temporarily brought together "in name in only" to discuss a specific topic or achieve a particular objective.

The Nominal Group technique is helpful for any group with very vocal or timid team members. It also can be used when the topic is very political or involved highly charged emotion because it allows expression of thought without threat of criticism.

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Clarifying team communication

Scoping

Scoping is a visual way of understanding the boundaries of the project or meeting. You can depict the items you will or won't discuss by using a picture frame format (Exhibit 3) or a table (Exhibit 4). Having an agreed upon scope allows you to better control the conversation during the meeting by ensuring you're talking about relevant topics.

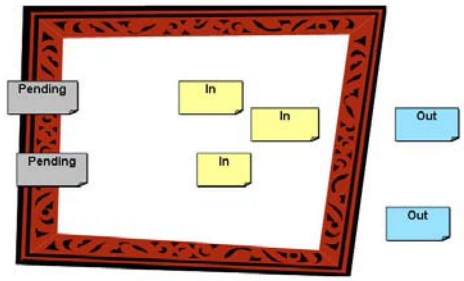

Exhibit 3 –Scope Frame

CATEGORY	IN SCOPE	OUT OF SCOPE	PENDING DISCUSSION
Customers	•	•	•
Business Areas	•	•	•
Processes	•	•	•
Technology	•	•	•
Products	•	•	•
Product Features	•	•	•
Functionality	•	•	•
Geographic Regions	•	•	•
Others	•	•	•

Exhibit 4 –Scope Table

Glossary

The Glossary is a record of definitions for terms, acronyms and phrases used during the meeting. The Glossary provides clarity to those who were not in the meeting by helping them understand the intent of the terms. This written record is added to the Appendices of the meeting documentation.

Other clarifying tips

As facilitators we've discovered a few other things that we can to help ensure that all meeting participants are on the same page.

- Use the terminology of the meeting participants. In other words, if they refer to an object as a "widget" and you've always thought of it as a "gadget", adopt their words and call it a widget.
- Capture ideas and comments as you hear them mentioned throughout the meeting. Don't expect people to remember what they said and say it again 10 minutes from now. Instead, capture it and put it in the parking lot if it's not relevant at the moment.
- If there are Phone participants, remember to:
  - Ask all attendees to state their name when speaking
  - Make sure conversation is verbalized – not "head-nods" or non-verbal communication
  - Use visual meeting software whenever possible (such as NetMeeting) to allow phone participants to see what is being said.
- Confirm meeting results and "next steps" prior to closing the meeting. Don't just assume that everyone is in agreement. Instead ask participants to indicate their agreement verbally.

Making group decisions

We can try to avoid making choices by doing nothing, but even that is a decision." (ThinkExist.com)

Most people would rather talk about something than make a decision about it. Your job as a facilitator is to help the group move from discussion to decision-making for those items that are necessary to the objective of the meeting. To help the group make good decisions, you must understand the following items prior to the meeting:

- What decisions are vital to the meeting? You may not know all of them, but you should be able to identify any key decisions that are required to meet your objective.
- What's the intended result of the decision? Is this a final decision that will be acted upon or is it a recommendation?
- What's the process that will be used to decide and what will happen if a decision can't be reached? The process should include the method (i.e., full consensus, majority vote, polling followed by discussion and re-polling, etc.) as well as a defined process for handling those decisions that can't be made in the meeting.

During the meeting,

- Communicate the intent and process for decision-making so that the team members are all on the same page.
- Prior to engaging in the decision-making process confirm that the right people to make the decision are in the room. If not, don't waste time talking about something that can't be decided. Instead, assign an action item to gather the right people and make the decision.
- Limit or time-box the amount of time allowed for discussion and debate before making a decision.
- If the team cannot seem to make the decision within the allocated timeframe, ask them whether additional information is needed. If so, define an action item to gather the information and postpone the decision until the next meeting.
- Once a decision is made, write it down and ask the group to confirm that you've written correctly. This becomes the group memory and guards against future misinterpretation. Also, when possible capture the rational for the decision so those in not in the room can better understand the "why" behind it.

Remember that decision-making can be stressful, so provide a supportive atmosphere. Don't postpone decisions lightly or arbitrarily, but neither should you rush a decision before it has been adequately discussed or if you don't have the right people present.

Deciding between alternatives

There are times when a group must make a decision between multiple options. There are several techniques that can be used to aid in this process – Pro's and Con's List, Nine-Block Diagram, or Impact Matrix. How do you know which technique to use? Each technique provides a different level of detail around the reasons for your decision – from minimal to very detailed. So you'll want to match the technique to the level of detail required to justify your decision.

The Pro's and Con's list is simply that – a list of the reasons this option is best and an opposing list of risks or obstacles associated with the option. This list can be captured on two separate flipchart pages – one for Pro's and one for Con's. After listing all the Pro's and Con's for each option, apply your agreed upon decision-making method to determine which option to recommend or implement.

The Nine-Block Diagram is a way of seeing how your alternatives compare in relation to two common factors which are important decision-making considerations. (Exhibit 5) This technique will rarely get you to a final decision, but it will help the group identify which two or three alternatives to rise to the top in relation to your criteria. To facilitate the creation of a Nine-Block Diagram, ask the group to discuss and agree upon the placement of each alternative in one of the nine "cells". The most important items will end up in the upper left cells. One the diagram is complete, encourage the group to discuss the results to determine if they are reasonable.

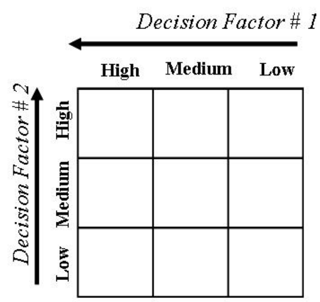

Exhibit 5 –Nine-Block Diagram Example

The Impact Matrix provides a way to rank each alternative against a set of criteria (i.e., the project goals, desired improvement targets, RFP requirements, etc.). (Exhibit 6) This technique provides the most decision-making rationale and quickly surfaces basic disagreements so they may be resolved up front. It forces a team to focus on the best solution or reasonable thing to do and reduces the chances of selecting someone's "pet project or solution".

To facilitate development of an Impact Matrix you need to work with the team to:

- Determine the criteria to compare each alternative against.
- Rank each option against the criteria.
- The highest score is the winner.
- Allow time for discussion to validate the results.

COLUMNS

ROWS

	Weighting factor	Process Impvt A	Process Impvt B	Opportunity C	Opportunity D	Opportunity E			
CTQ 1	5		nn	nn	nn				
CTQ 2	4				nn	nn			
Target 3	4	nn			nn				
Target 4	2				nn				
Totals		nn	nn	nn	nn	nn			

Exhibit 6 –Impact Matrix

Summary

Productive meetings don't just happen. We've all experienced differing versions of the "meeting nightmare" where participants run wild and results are an illusion. But through the application of facilitation skills and techniques, we can tame the wild and achieve real results by:

- Determining if you have the right skills and capabilities to be an objective facilitator for the meeting.
- Using Objectives, Action Items and a Parking Lot to keep the team focused on the topic at hand.
- Using your Agenda, Ground Rules, Time-boxing, and the Nominal Group technique to manage the group dynamics and keep the team moving.
- Making sure everyone is on the same page by creating a Scope Table/Frame and Glossary.
- Helping the team make decisions efficiently by clarifying the intended result and determining a process ahead of time.
- Providing a structure for deciding between alternatives by using a Pro's/Con's List, the Nine-Block Diagram or the Impact Matrix.

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