

# LEADERSHIP TIPS

## FACILITATING MEETINGS Fall 2003

by Dr. Marilyn Manning



How do you keep people focused and motivated in meetings, let alone entice them to attend? Meetings consume growing amounts of time, money, and energy. How would you rate the last meeting you conducted or attended? Was it the best use of everyone's time? Did you leave with a sense of exhilaration and a clear set of actions and decisions? Or, did you leave feeling frustrated?

Planning and running a good meeting takes skills in listening, facilitating, organizing, and motivating. Have you and your leaders developed these skills adequately? You may find it worth the investment to hire a professional facilitator who can teach you some of the techniques by modeling good meeting management or through a workshop.

Here are some basics you can put to practice immediately.

### **Before the meeting, ask these key questions:**

1. Is the time invested worth the cost?
2. Are the key people able to attend? (If not, reschedule.)
3. Did you inform all participants of outcomes, objectives, and the agenda?
4. Did you handle the logistics?

### **During the meeting try this:**

1. State and agree to specific outcomes.

2. Display an agreed upon agenda with time allotments.
3. Agree on ground rules such as:
  - start and end on time
  - no side conversations
  - respect all input
  - equal participation
  - focus on agenda
  - come prepared

### **Designate who will play the facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper roles.**

Have the recorder write down in full view of group (flip chart, white board) key ideas. Record issues that are not on agenda on a "parking lot" chart. Have the timekeeper give periodic warnings.

As a facilitator, your job is to assist the group unobtrusively to focus on accomplishing the given tasks. Have a well-planned agenda, which is distributed to attendees ahead of time. Review and reinforce the ground rules and handle any disruptions.

### **Use evaluations to make needed adjustments.**

Dedicate a few minutes before closure of each meeting to ask:

- Did we accomplish our desired outcomes? (If not, why not?)
- Did we keep focused and productive?
- What worked best in this meeting?
- What could we improve next time?
- Was this meeting the best use of everyone's time?

### **Vary your content:**

Be careful that your meetings are not just information exchanges. Use them for creative thinking and problem solving. Quality won't happen accidentally. You might try the following activity to add some variety:

Ask each person to write down the biggest challenge they are facing along with the obstacles to resolve that issue. Next, have them discuss their issues in pairs. Some of the suggestions can be shared with the large group. The large group can then identify actions and mutually agreed upon solutions.

### **Handling unproductive behaviors.**

Try some of these strategies:

**Dominating behavior:** Direct responses to the entire group. Give eye contact to others. Ask for others' questions.

**Side conversations:** Physically move toward talkers. Ask: "Was there something you needed?"

**Arguing behavior:** Agree that the issue is interesting, but say: "We must move on in the interest of time. Other questions?"

**Dr. Marilyn Manning CSP, CMC**

945 Mountain View Avenue  
Mountain View, CA 94040-2411

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**Tangents:** Put the item on the "parking lot".

**Joking:** Show a sense of humor or smile, then re-focus.

**Irrelevant questions:** Say: "I think that's interesting, but I'd like to focus on..."

**Outstanding meetings include recognition:**

Few things motivate more than positive recognition for one's achievements and contributions. Generous recognition sets the tone in any environment. It reinforces the cultural values and even the purpose of the organization and its services. Take advantage of every meeting by recognizing successes. Don't you often find yourself and others spending more time correcting faults, mistakes, and problems than you take to acknowledge positive actions and behaviors? Studies show that people want more meaning in their work. They want a better quality of life, so find out what they need to enhance the quality of their work environment through better meeting management.

**When to call for outside help:**

If you and your leaders are a little weak in meeting management skills, consider hiring an outside facilitator who can model the skills. Using a neutral party can put a spark of new life into your meetings. Also, having an outside facilitator can free you up to really observe the group dynamics and relax and be an equal participant.

In summary, there are some key elements that will improve your meetings. Ask the key questions before ever holding a meeting. Don't hesitate to re-schedule if an essential person cannot attend at the designated

time. Be clear about the desired outcomes by using a well-planned agenda. Keep your focus and stick to your timelines. Require all participants to come prepared in order to have the best discussions possible. Assign roles ahead for better results. Evaluate your meetings regularly. Utilize suggested techniques for addressing disruptive behaviors. Plan ways to give praise. And, consider using an outside facilitator when the group could benefit from a neutral party who's skilled in listening, organizing, motivating, and getting results.

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