

What it takes to referee a GOOD MEETING



The way in which you manage your meetings is critical to their success...

The chairperson of a meeting can act as referee by staying impartial, keeping order, making sure that people keep to the rules of the meeting, and that everyone is treated fairly. It's a common role in formal meetings. It's also necessary when discussion becomes heated and a group needs a strong chairperson to maintain control while allowing people to share their views.

The chairperson can also be the leader in a meeting. The leader thinks through a problem, decides on a solution, and then obtains the commitment of the group to that solution. This role is effective when a group has no ideas of its own and needs help, or when the only person with ideas is clearly wrong. But leaders who continually do the thinking for everyone and turn down or ridicule suggestions from others, end up surrounded by people who have learned it is better not to speak up and meetings become little more than monologues from the chair.

The third role a chairperson can play is probably most useful in the business world. It is that of the facilitator who manages interactions in such a way that decisions are made and agreements reached.

There are three types of interaction that a facilitator can manage:

1. The way new ideas or proposals are raised in a meeting
2. How information is put forward to ensure clarity
3. How agreements and disagreements are handled

Find the middle ground

One of the biggest challenges for a facilitator is to achieve a balance between too many and too few new ideas being introduced in a meeting. When the right number of new ideas is raised, the meeting will have interest and energy and the discussion will move forward constructively. If too many proposals are put forward, people become confused and unable to agree on anything. Worse, when there are many competing ideas in the air, the person with the loudest voice and the most persuasive or insistent argument may carry the day, even though their ideas may not necessarily be the best.

A good facilitator will make sure that everyone is given the opportunity to be heard, and that each suggestion is fairly considered. People who feel strongly about their own ideas should not be allowed to dominate the discussion at the expense of others with equally good ideas, but softer voices.

See the wood for the trees

Balance is also necessary when analysing the past, and planning for the future. Meetings can get bogged down when problems are dissected in too much detail. A good chairperson knows when and how to move a group forward into planning for future action by specifically asking for suggestions and proposals for action.

When there is too much information, especially detail around minor issues, the meeting will become tedious and time consuming. When there is too little, meetings become disorganised; hasty, ill-informed decisions are made; and afterwards participants are often unable to agree on what was said or decided.

The level of detail discussed in a meeting should be appropriate to its purpose. For example, if you are investigating an industrial accident, detail is important. If you are discussing business strategy, you should avoid becoming side-tracked by operational detail.

When some people say a lot and others don't contribute to the discussion, a facilitator can make space for others, by saying: "Sam, can you hold that thought. I'd like to hear what Mary has to say on this." Then bring Mary into the discussion by using her name, an inviting gesture, and saying: "Mary, what is your opinion on this?" or "Mary, can you add anything to what has been said?"

Managing the information in a meeting also means making sure everything is understood. Facilitators must check that they understand what is being said by saying: "Let me be sure I've got this right..." and then paraphrasing what has been said and understood.



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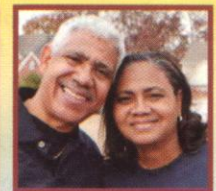
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Disagreement need not be negative,

as long as people disagree on the issues,

and don't attack each other on a personal level.

Summarising information and decisions, both during and at the end of a meeting, is also a very powerful way of keeping everything clear and on track.

Lose the emotion

Disagreement need not be negative, as long as people disagree on the issues, and don't attack each other on a personal level. Meetings in which contentious proposals are put on the table are likely to contain a lot of agreement and disagreement, but it can be stimulating and constructive when everyone becomes fully engaged in the discussion.

When there is too much reacting however, the discussion can become emotional and focus may be lost, particularly if people take sides, or if they react before they have understood what has been said.

A good balance of agreement and disagreement will help people to know where they stand. If there is very little interaction, this could indicate a lack of trust between participants, or that there is not enough information to make decisions. It may also reflect the fact that the participants aren't responsible for the issues being discussed or the decisions that have to be made.

Meetings with little agreement or disagreement can feel awkward as people hold back and don't offer their opinions. In this scenario participants may go into too much detail with their proposals in an effort to force a reaction. Others tend to shut down, infected by the low energy levels. Meetings like this can be very difficult to chair.

Effective meeting management requires a specific set of skills. Given the central role that meetings play in business life, they are skills worth having. **YB**

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