



FACILITATING CONSTRUCTIVE MEETINGS

BY DEBORAH REIDY

Have you ever dared to count the amount of time you spend in meetings every month? Staff meetings, supervision, board meetings, work groups, strategic planning ses-

sions, meetings with your broker or accountant . . . some people even have family meetings! And yet we generally spend much of this time feeling bored, distracted, worried, or frus-

trated. How can the time we dedicate to meetings be more constructive? Depending on your role, there are a number of simple ways to make the most of meetings:

When You Are the Facilitator:

- **Approach each meeting as an opportunity to strengthen the relationships among participants.** Meetings are as much about forming connections as they are about achieving results, so keep a balance between the process and the objectives.
- **Be thoughtful about the purpose of the meeting.** Meetings are better for building consensus and collectively solving problems than they are for flooding participants with information. Find another way to communicate reams of data; doing so in a group setting just demoralizes people.
- **Allow small talk at the beginning, even if you are pressed for time.** If participants have a chance to relax and bond, they will be much more effective than if they must instantly be on task.
- **Pay close attention to body language.** If someone is resisting a particular decision, you can sense it long before you take a vote on a proposal.
- **Deliberately cultivate dissenting views.** By doing so, you and others might learn something new.
- **Always keep the big picture in mind.** What is the ultimate purpose of this meeting? By keeping the goal in mind, you can stay focused on the end result yet be flexible about how to get there. Let people know at the beginning of the meeting what absolutely has to be accomplished by the end.
- **If no one talks, consider the meeting a failure.** You can be sure that people will talk afterward—and not favorably!
- **Never finish later than promised.** Meetings that run long violate trust and communicate a tone of disrespect for participants' other commitments.
- **Praise in public; criticize in private.**
- **Strive to make each meeting you facilitate a pleasurable experience.** Remember, you can never regain the hours you spend in meetings. For that reason, you owe it to yourself and others to use the time as constructively as possible.

When You Are a Participant:

- **Before you agree to attend a meeting, make sure your participation is essential.** Otherwise, you will be bored and resentful.
- **Approach each meeting with your own personal goals.** You could see the meeting as an opportunity to learn something new (at least one thing!), to strengthen your relationship with other participants, or to increase your attention span.
- **Use your feelings and reactions as a guide to how others are feeling.** Take the initiative to check out people's feelings in a sensitive way: "I don't know if anyone else is feeling overwhelmed, but I can feel my body really tensing up."
- **Take the initiative to keep the agenda on track.** It's not solely the facilitator's responsibility.
- **Try to listen as much as you talk.**
- **If you must do other work, try to keep it as unobtrusive as possible.**
- **Strive to make each meeting you participate in a pleasurable experience.** Remember, you can never regain the hours you spend in meetings. For that reason, you owe it to yourself and others to use the time as constructively as possible.

By following these simple guidelines, you can make the time you and others spend in meetings satisfying, build productive relationships with your partners, and ultimately create reward-

ing outcomes. And isn't that why we schedule meetings to begin with? ■

Deborah Reidy (deborah@reidyassociates.org), president and founder of Reidy Associates, has

worked with many kinds of organizations since 1977. Along with her work as a consultant, she founded several businesses and was director of training for the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation. For additional resources, go to www.reidyassociates.org.