

Managing

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Tips on Reaching Consensus

Managers who serve as facilitators must learn to recognize and address disruptive behaviors that undermine the spirit and practice of consensus.

GROUP FACILITATION is an art, and facilitating consensus-based decisions is the pinnacle of that art form. It can be one of the most challenging types of decision processes to facilitate and one of the most rewarding. However, the more you facilitate consensus-based processes, the more likely you are to encounter problem participants that have the potential to cause an unnecessary breakdown in the process. The manager who serves as facilitator must learn to recognize these disruptive players and constructively address them.

Problems include absent members, grandstanding members, those who block the proceedings, those who pressure other members, and silent members.

Absent Members

Occasionally, a group member shows up to a meeting after missing one or more important discussions. This member expects to participate in the decision despite the fact that he or she has not been privy to important facts and perspectives shared at previous meetings. Valuable time can be wasted attempting to bring this person up to speed. Worse still, the individual may take an inflexible stand based on an uninformed premise.

To avoid this, the manager serving as facilitator should set ground rules when the group is established. They should obtain from each member an up-front commitment to attend a minimum number of meetings to be able to participate in decisions. (This exact number can vary according to the purpose of the discussions.) Members who miss more than the allowed number of meetings may still

participate in discussions and express opinions, but they will have forfeited their right to vote on the decision.

Those missing any meetings, even if allowed under the rules, must seek to be briefed on what they missed prior to the next meeting. Members who do not avail themselves of the briefings also lose their role in decision making.

If a decision is complex or meetings are likely to go on for several months, the facilitator can designate alternate representatives. Alternates attend all meetings as observers when the primary representative is present. If that member is absent, the alternate becomes a decision maker.

Grandstanding

In many meetings, a dominant or outspoken member may repeatedly raise the

same issue over and over again, even after it has been addressed. This kind of person sometimes becomes argumentative, repeats the same point over and over again, or takes illogical positions. The grandstanding member is often looking for attention or using the group to work out a personal issue unrelated to the group's purpose.

To curtail this type of behavior, facilitators must first determine whether the concern repeatedly raised by the dominant member is relevant to the group's purpose and decision criteria. If it is, the facilitator should ask group members to provide facts and information that will address it. If it is not relevant, it is up to the facilitator to explain why.

Then, the facilitator must record the person's point and acknowledge that it

has been heard and how it was addressed. If necessary, the facilitator should interrupt and ask group members whether they feel the issue has been addressed. If so, the facilitator should insist that the group move on.

A facilitator might say the following: "Thanks, Sally. I've heard you mention the safe drinking water issue three times, and I want to point out that we have recorded the issue as you described it up here on the flip chart. Just as we've

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