

## Guide for Great Facilitation

One of the most important traits for a meeting facilitator is the ability to listen and observe, says Joan Eisenstodt, chief strategist of Eisenstodt Associates, LLC, a Washington, D.C. conference consulting, facilitation, and training company.

"The ability to listen to the nuances of a meeting attendee and bring out the issues is critical," Eisenstodt says. "No matter what anyone says, 90 percent of all the people who come to a meeting have their own agendas. Facilitators need to listen for those and do something about it. For example, you may notice someone who is disengaged or know that someone is an introvert and less likely to participate and may want a way to get his or her feelings out. As a facilitator, you have options such as breaking into smaller groups, or taking a break and asking that anyone who has questions to write them down and hand them to you during the break. It's your job to ensure that all voices are heard in some way."

Eisenstodt also recommends these tips for great facilitation:

**Do your homework prior to a meeting.** Know ahead of time if there are any roadblocks, know the political land mines, and know how to maneuver around or through them.

**Set ground rules for the meeting.** For example, request that attendees stick to the agenda. This way, if people digress, you can put their ideas on a "parking lot" – a white board or a notepad, and get to them later.

**Ensure that goals and objectives are met.** Know what you need to accomplish. If you know there are specific items that you must get through, put them first on the agenda. Instead of putting housekeeping items at the beginning of the agenda (minutes from last meeting, etc.), send out those items before the meeting and get consensus so you can begin your meeting with your priority subjects.

**Limit sidebars or meeting hogs.** They are noisy and disruptive to the whole meeting process. Simple solution: ask talkers if they need clarification or pull them aside at a break and ask them to stop.

**Know when to break.** Observe if the crowd is too tired to continue, and create the creature comforts to allow that to happen. Give people permission to get up and walk around if they need to, to leave for the restroom or get a drink so people will find their own comfort levels. Take regular breaks, says Eisenstodt. "Many people don't want to miss anything and they're terrified that if they run to the bathroom that they might miss the best part of the conversation," she says. "Think about how you would feel if you had to leave the room."

**Seek input from non-talkers.** Occasionally ask questions and seek input from those who haven't had a chance to talk. Don't put them on the spot, but make them comfortable by asking if they have anything to add or ask. "It's not only about facilitating the process, it's about making people feel involved and more comfortable," says Eisenstodt.

**Redirect positively.** If there is an uncomfortable situation and you need to head off a conversation that may be going in the wrong direction, do it in a positive tone. Say something such as, "That's a great

point. And that's important for us to know. What I'd like to do is capture that so that we have it to discuss later." Then bring the group back to where you want to be.

**Reserve judgment.** Ask open-ended questions instead of making statements, or if you do make statements say something like, "tell me more about..." so that you're not making a judgment, says Eisenstodt. Clarify points throughout the meeting by asking questions or making statements such as, "I think I heard you say..." Restate or mimic what you think are good ideas.

**Take improv classes.** "They teach you how to respond appropriately and bring conversations back to where you want them without sounding like you are doing that," says Eisenstodt. "It's not at all about performance; it's about listening and responding appropriately. Improv is extremely valuable for anyone."