Webinar Q&A Transcript

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE IN A MEETING THAT DOESN'T WASTE MY TIME?

TOOLS FOR LEADING GOAL-DRIVEN MEETINGS AND MAINTAINING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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QUESTION 1

What techniques would you recommend to politely interrupt and redirect overtalkers to get the meeting back on track?

Allie: We've found it helpful to set the standard before the meeting starts that we are the facilitators and it is our role in this process to notify someone when they've gone off topic, on a tangent or beyond the allotted time to make sure the meeting remains on track. This way, people feel a little less personally attacked when they are cut off.

Jessica: We recognize that people should be provided a space to share their thoughts, as long as the conversation doesn't go off into a rabbit hole. Our solution to this is to begin the meeting noting that we'll have a rapid-fire discussion for participants to voice their ideas within a contained time frame. If someone does go off on a tangent, we also reinforce positively by saying, "What I'm hearing is great but as mentioned, we only have X amount of time to get through this part of the agenda. For now, we're going to place your idea in a 'parking lot' or on a 'to-be-discussed' list and will create space in a future meeting or separate conversation to work through this".

Dallase: This initial setting of bounds is important and might be uncomfortable in the first couple of meetings, especially when people are previously used to not having a designated facilitator, but after a while when someone starts overspeaking, others look to the facilitator to take the reins and wrap it up. There's an expectation that it's going to be a productive meeting and that's the role that you play. The facilitator is the referee of the meeting, making sure everyone can be involved within the rules of the game.

Jessica: At the end of the meeting, participants will sometimes note that they're thankful that as the facilitator I cut them off because otherwise we would have sat around for hours talking about a particular topic. People really do appreciate that role.

QUESTION 2

What advice do you have for groups or people who are resistant to setting and sharing agendas for meetings?

Dallase: That can be a challenge when you're trying to adopt a new process. For me, it takes some persistence, and maybe even the sharing of this webinar, to show that you have a rationale behind what you're putting together. It is important to explain why you're sharing the agenda, the reasoning behind it and why and how you're trying to engage people. But you need to be prepared with that information in order to support your plan for both an internal and external planning agenda. If you're just to respond to "why do we have an agenda?" with "because I think I should," it's your word against theirs.

QUESTION 3

How do you ensure meetings begin on time when meeting attendees are notoriously late - especially when you are not the meeting facilitator?

Jessica: We set a commitment for ourselves that no matter what, we will start at a certain time. Then, as people arrive on time, we make it a point to thank them for it. Considering Columbia is a large campus and sometimes slight lateness can be inevitable, we sometimes anticipate taking the first 5 minutes for initial casual welcome conversation to set the mood of the room. Then 5 minutes in, regardless of latecomer absences, we start the official meeting.

After people got used to this expectation of punctual start times after a few meetings, they would come in and say things like, "oh wow, I'm sorry I'm late!" We were consistent with not bending meeting start and end times from the beginning and so people gradually started to adjust. Because of this, latecomers were less of a concern over time.

Allie: To emphasize that point, people are not generally used to being thanked for being on time so when you do, it can be taken as a sort of personal accolade that they take to heart.

I also second the fact that we don't stop a meeting for late comers which is something new that we learned from Dallase and the GreenerU team – if you continue the trajectory of the meeting, don't stop and review what you've gone over in the time the meeting started, it really reinforces that you have to be on time.

Also there's a respect piece on our end – ending on time is really important and people appreciate that. After a couple of meetings of realizing that we did actually end exactly on time, they were more likely to be on time for all future meetings.

Dallase: To reiterate, the rolling start is important, as is recognizing that not everyone's arrival time will be perfectly aligned. Anyone entering within the first 5 minutes is walking into an already-engaged room even if you're only still warming up the audience before you get into the meat of the meeting.

QUESTION 4

Do you conduct the feedback evaluation, i.e. strengths and improvables, of the meeting after *each* meeting?

Allie: Yes we do. We reserve space on our internal agenda for 5 minutes at the end for strengths and improvables with the group. When we first learned that we had to do that, we had that same question – "Do we have to do this at the end of *every* meeting"? It's so important because it doesn't leave any gaps where you could otherwise be surprised by information that is new to you later on in the process. Right then and there you're getting feedback on what went well, what needs improvement and it allows for a fully transparent process. The feedback portion shifts the culture of how the meeting itself runs because if we're standing at the front of the room willing to take helpful criticism, it allows people to feel that this is an open and honest space and that we're really looking to move forward and do whatever it takes to improve the meeting process.

Jessica: Getting strengths and improvables keeps the meetings iterative. So if we're receiving feedback at the end of every single meeting, we have an opportunity to adjust after each one. In addition to the fact that the content of each meeting differs, so too will the adjustment to feedback so that we can come back the following week and say, "we heard X from you and here's how we'll be adjusting this week," etc.

Dallase: To the point of the title of today's webinar, a facilitator isn't there to waste people's time so these small check-ins throughout the process are so helpful. The idea is that we don't want to waste your time so first help us to continually improve.

QUESTION 5

Which are the tools best used to help with the "Eeyores"?

Dallase: As a reminder, the "Eeyore" is the personality that is constantly thinking "this will never work and not on this campus" – it's that sad trombone personality and there's probably one in every group. One of the tactics I use is to understand why that person is feeling overwhelmed and has developed feeling of learned helplessness. To do this, you can spend time before or after the meeting once you've identified the situation to check-in with that person and ask why they may feel this way because they may actually have some real past experience, learning outcomes, and tips for you that would be valuable going forward.

The other piece is recognizing that they're trying to give feedback, though it might not feel constructive in the moment. So as the facilitator, you can try to extract and paraphrase their words and turn it into constructive feedback. For example, someone may be frustrated with the timeline you've put together for your planning process and may think it's unrealistic , which seems really negative, but there might be a bit of objective truth to that feeling. As the facilitator, you can own it and say, "It sounds like you're frustrated. I'm specifically hearing that you don't think this timeline is realistic, is that accurate?" Here, you're paraphrasing to the way that you'd like to hear their feedback constructively, making the person feel heard and ideally showing them that this is a different type of meeting where their contribution can matter.

Allie: Agreed - often, the reaction of an Eeyore personality may be indicative of a deeper knowledge of the situation which is why they should be addressed. The Eeyore's initial reaction may in turn invoke feeling of misunderstanding and frustration from the facilitator or other participants because they can't believe this person is being so negative. The facilitator needs to be able to recognize when this happens and take a bit of time out to understand that this Eeyore may also have a truth which needs to be considered.

QUESTION 6

How do you become the facilitator when it is not actually your official position, i.e. on a team where everyone is an equal?

Allie: That's something that we're still working on. As mentioned, the process has been iterative and has often been something that is especially challenging for us because along with being two members of the sustainability office with opinions on the creation of a sustainability plan, we also have to be strong and neutral facilitators during many meetings.

By defining very clearly that your role as a facilitator is to act as a neutral party and simply are here to keep the meeting on track, people will actually feel relieved rather than upset that they haven't been chosen to facilitate, because it sets certain expectations and allows others in the meeting to relax and just discuss the meeting content which is why they're there in the first place.

In a meeting without a pre-established facilitator, you may find that there's usually one person who takes charge and ultimately running the meeting which shows that ultimately you do need somebody keeping track and the facilitator is a necessary role.

Jessica: To be a facilitator does not necessarily mean that we are in charge, making all of the decisions, have all of the answers, nor are we the experts on everything, because we are not. We need to recognize that because we have experts in the room who oversee operations and are researching certain topics, we need to hear from them.

If you we want to jump in and provide an opinion, we'll literally say – and this is taking from one of Dallase's lines – "We're going to take off our facilitator hat for a minute and offer our perspective as members of the sustainability office", which helps to draw a line rather than keep it blurry that you are becoming a participant with an opinion for a brief amount of meeting time.

It's certainly a delicate balance but even if it isn't your official role to be a facilitator, you can look at it a little more casually by saying, "I'm the person who's going to help to create a framework" which again doesn't mean you're the boss or making all decisions, it just means you're putting your hand in the air to say "I'm going to help organize this so we don't waste our time here."

Dallase: Depending on the group you're working with and if you feel like you're having a hard time being neutral, my colleague Ben and I will come in to facilitate meetings where we truly are the neutral party. Now that isn't always realistic or something that's possible for all meetings but sometimes it is valuable to have someone come in who's completely impartial. Overall, it's good to recognize that everyone has something at stake and being transparent with your process can help others to accept the process.