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Creating Productive Meetings

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Creating Productive Meetings

Abstract

Group functioning and meetings may evolve from being unproductive and inefficient to being pleasurable and efficient over time. A Maine Extension work team shares lessons in their experience in making such a transformation. Anyone within a group is capable of initiating and building support for process change. Collaborative leaders in a group step forward to offer an invaluable service that can result in increased group efficiency, satisfaction, and productivity.

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Have you ever imagined somebody--anybody--rescuing you from the frustration and grind of an unproductive meeting? We all have suffered through ineffective meetings. Two members of an Extension program leadership team offered to serve as co-facilitators and developed a replicable process for transforming their team's meetings over time.

Any small group is akin to a small business. Groups grow or die; change or fail to thrive; meet new challenges or fall behind (Bangs & Pinson, 1999). For a group to thrive and meet new challenges effectively, it needs to develop methods for planning and running meetings, interacting, and making decisions.

By developing such methods, the Maine 4-H Program Leadership Team (4-H PLT) evolved into a cohesive group, with a common vision for an effective, efficient, and productive working team, while maintaining a sense of passion and fun for its work.

When to Intervene

A group generally knows when it needs to change. Signs include group members consistently complaining of being exhausted following meetings, a feeling that "nothing seems to get accomplished" by the group, and declining attendance numbers (Kelsey & Plumb, 2001; Bens, 1999). The need for change becomes self-evident. An unspoken consensus builds among group members that change must occur.

Why Wait?

A common mistake of ineffective groups is that they will wait for a "savior" or identified leader to rescue them from themselves. Don't wait. Creativity and innovation can emerge from anywhere within an organization or group. Indeed, a function of strong leadership is to encourage group members to create and innovate from within and to feel welcomed to "step into the breach" where needed (Chappell, 1999).

The Change Process

Replicable Facilitation Processes

In Maine, the 4-H PLT was transformed by two group members who stepped forward and used traditional facilitation processes to strengthen the group. Any group can replicate these facilitation processes:

- Contract with the group to plan and manage meetings, to serve as co-facilitators, and to plan and design agendas before each meeting.
- Refine group process through interactive and ongoing evaluation.
- Institutionalize meeting management and facilitation through a train-the-trainer model.
 - Require participants submitting agenda items to include detailed issue statements, expected discussion outcomes, decision-making methodology to be used and time desired.
 - Design agendas to balance intense work with lighter work. Incorporate peer recognition, interactivity and multiple methodologies.
 - Arrange for new facilitators to complete a 20-hour training, observe the primary facilitators and co-facilitate with a trainer over a 12-month period.
 - Establish a consistent format for agenda. Incorporate attached files with additional information such as past minutes or decisions, tables or background reading.

Ground Rules

While group facilitation is a science, it is also an art. At its core are the self-regulating agreements, or ground rules, made among group members. Roger Schwarz notes that some groups are unable to pull together, tackle difficult tasks, and solve problems, while others can. One difference, he says, may be the presence of ground rules in effective groups.

Schwarz suggests that the development of ground rules be based on three values:

- Valid information
- Free and informed choice
- Internal commitment

These three values reinforce each other. Group members require *valid information* to make informed choices. When they make *free and informed choices*, they are more likely to be *internally committed* and, as a result, more likely to monitor their decisions to ensure they are implemented effectively.

The Response to Change

Improvements to the Maine 4-H PLT meetings were grounded in these three core values and the replicable process. Groups operating with similar norms may expect improved effectiveness. When embraced by the Maine team, the values of *valid information* and *free and informed choice* produced these results:

- Creative interaction by all group members, including
 - Initial contracting with the facilitators,
 - Creation of agendas, and
 - Supporting group work with positive interactions.
- Fewer discussion tangents and digressions during meetings.
- Active interventions and naming of behaviors modeling healthy group process.

These first two values in turn create the third value of *internal commitment*. In the Maine 4-H PLT, "internal commitment" manifested as:

- Greater group responsibility for itself and self-regulation of its members,
- Increased attendance,
- Decreased tendency of members to stay mired in negative history, and
- A safe atmosphere that allowed differences and frustrations to surface and be heard and be accepted, allowing the process to keep moving forward.

These three values--valid information, free and informed choice and internal commitment--not only provided the basis for the ground rules; they also supported the replicable process.

- The primary facilitators opened their planning process to observation so new facilitators were able to make informed decisions about commitment to a facilitation role.
- Agenda templates allowed any combination of co-facilitators to create a consistent meeting format.
- Outcome-based agenda templates provided valid information with which decisions could be

made.

Summary

Unproductive groups can be transformed. When a consensus--often silent--builds among group members that change is needed, individuals recognizing the need for change can step forward and offer to serve as co-facilitators. In the Maine 4-H PLT, well-planned and facilitated meetings with clear ground rules and early successes provided the groundwork for a replicable process for transforming meetings. By creating early successes, we built support for positive change. Meetings became more effective and enjoyable and group cohesion and output were improved.

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