

Making the Most of Meetings: Effectively Facilitating Your Meeting Process

by Kelly S. Petrock

This article is the second in a two part series on meeting effectiveness. Content, concepts and capabilities addressed in these articles can be transferred to clients via workshops, coaching, training and tele-classes.

So, you are sitting comfortably in your meeting room and are waiting for your redesigned meeting to start. You have refined your meeting outcomes. They are now crystal clear, focused, and the anchor points for your meeting. Redefining the tone of the meeting has allowed you to think through the types of interactions that will best support the outcomes. You have dealt with constraints, clarified the purpose, and redesigned the meeting process and inputs accordingly. You have done a lot of good work! It's "show-time".

Your role during the meeting is to guide the team process and interaction in such a way that the outcomes of the meeting are met. While being specific to your meeting, the outcomes tend to be of two basic types:

- **Task outcomes** involve decisions and solutions where the *quality* of the outcome is critical.
- **Relational outcomes** involve the groups' openness and trust where the group's *commitment and buy-in* is critical.

The effective facilitation fundamentals covered in this article are:

- Important "**helping mechanisms**" that all facilitators should use.
- Understanding the **meeting roles & behaviors** that impact outcomes related to decision/solution quality and commitment.
- The definition of and types of **facilitation interventions**.
- **Intervention strategies** for effectively intervening into the groups behavior and interactions.

Meeting facilitation is a skill, a set of practices that can be learned. Like any skill there is a certain amount of knowledge and education that is helpful. Meetings are group and interpersonal processes. Knowledge in group psychology, personal style, communication and interpersonal interaction provide helpful concepts that can inform us and enhance our capabilities as facilitators.



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Like any other skill, effective facilitation requires practice, and then more practice. Many people equate facilitation with surfing; you have to "go with the flow" and be ready to change directions at any moment. If you are too active you end up ahead of the wave, struggling alone in rough water, dragging others behind you. When the skills of facilitation are applied too frequently and too intensely, participants feel minimized, wonder why they were invited and learn that the meeting goes quickest if you are just passively along for the ride.

If you are not active enough, you end up behind the wave and without propulsion, going nowhere. Participants in these meetings suffer from the lack of purpose, don't come prepared to future meetings, go off topic, have side-bar conversations and basically flounder.

The most frequent of these two scenarios is facilitators *not* being active enough. When we train facilitators and we discuss why the most frequent failure mode is inaction, we find the primary reason is lack of confidence. Participants almost always report that they knew something was wrong and they knew that they should do something. Their guts were screaming for action but they just could not engage their mouths. The inaction is most often lack of confidence in whether to act and then what form that action should take. Training, education and practice over time is the best way to learn to “ride the wave,” to build confidence, and to stay on top of the process.

Helping Mechanisms

There are four important helping mechanisms that facilitators should build into every meeting.

The first helping mechanism is to start the meeting by reviewing the meeting outcomes with the group. This review is worth the time. After reviewing the outcomes, ask the group if these are still the right outcomes. Confirming the outcomes sets the stage, grounds the group and helps to establish your role as facilitator.

The second helping mechanism is the creation of Norms. Norms are descriptions of practices that if adhered to, will help ensure that the meeting process supports the task and relational outcomes. Having norms can really help to strengthen a facilitators resolve, helping him/her trust and therefore act on his/her judgment.

Norms are a contract with the group. Whenever possible, prior to the meeting, discuss with your team and develop a list of norms and guidelines for the meeting. This should be a participative discussion with the group about what they need and expect from each other to make the meeting (redesigned / existing) more effective and productive. This is a critical list to build. By building this list the group is giving you and each other the right to manage the meeting. Remember, the point is not just having the list but creating it with your group. Below are some typical norms and guidelines for meeting.

- Staying focused or following the agenda,
- No having side bar conversations,
- Hearing others out before stating your position,
- Focusing on issues within our control,

- Not interrupting or cutting members off,
- Being on time, and
- Being prepared,

Later in this article I’ll outline some specific roles and behaviors that are great starting points for developing productive meeting norms.

In addition to building this list you may want to have the team tell you what they would like to see as an appropriate response if the norms and guidelines are not adhered to.

As you create and define the norms and guidelines keep in mind that your ultimate goal may be to have group members facilitating the meetings themselves—not just you. Otherwise there may be a tendency for members to abdicate all facilitative responsibilities to you alone. By enrolling members in norm development you can avoid becoming the focal point and ending up as the meeting “cop”. Aim to set the stage for a self-facilitating group.

To support this goal, try to use language such as asking “What norms and guidelines would help us?” “What response do we think should occur if a norm or guideline is not adhered to?” This will help the job of facilitating from being seen as only “your job” and not theirs. Later in this article I’ll cover the topic of Facilitation Interventions. The list of norms helps facilitators to understand clearly what behaviors may require an intervention. Additionally, I’ll overview four levels of interventions. During this “norming” process as you invite the group to specify what your responses should be, you’ll have a clearer sense for the level of intervention that may be needed.

Norms and guidelines are most effective and necessary when you have stable meetings (same people, outcomes, and purpose over time). Even for a “one-time” only meeting for an hour and a half or longer, the list of norms and guidelines is worth the seven or so minutes it takes to develop.

After establishing norms and guiding principles, the third helping mechanism is to arm yourself with a “parking lot.” The parking lot is a fantastic mechanism for getting a group back on track and away from discussing items that are on not the agenda or out of their control. Typically people are comfortable letting go of an issue they feel has been acknowledged and will be attended to at a later time.

Finally, the fourth helping mechanism is a critique of the meeting. Each meeting should end with a critique. The critique helps you improve your facilitating skills and the meetings effectiveness. The critique also gets members actively discussing and, in effect, rehearsing how to have a better meeting next time. Some issues to critique are:

- Our outcomes. Did we achieve all of our outcomes? What would have helped us get there more effectively?
- Our norms. How did we do on our norms? Do these norms still work or do we need to modify them?
- Our areas of improvement. What will make our next meeting better?
- Our areas to maintain. What did we really do well, what worked that we should be sure to do again?

Meeting Roles & Behaviors

The reasons that facilitators fail to act (the most common of mistakes) are because they don't know what to look for, and they don't trust their sense of what behaviors are productive and which are unproductive.

The difficulty with meetings is that it can take a very long time for you to determine if the outcomes of the meeting were achieved at an optimal level. Were the decisions/solutions achieved of the highest quality? Did the group achieve the level of commitment and buy-in to ensure the decision/solutions will withstand the test of time and organizational tribulations? As facilitators, the only indicators we have of our meeting effectiveness is an understanding of the meeting process. A good, healthy process is the best indicator of optimal, high-quality and high-commitment outcomes.

Figure 1. is a list of Task-Facilitating and Task-Blocking roles and behaviors. Meetings where members engage in the Task-Facilitating roles tend to reach decisions and solutions that are of a high quality. Meetings where members engage in the Task-Blocking roles tend to reach faulty decisions and solutions.

Figure 2. is a list of the Relationship-Facilitating and Relationship-Blocking roles and behaviors. Meetings where members engage in the Relationship-Facilitat-

Figure 1.

Task Roles & Behaviors	
Facilitating	Blocking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Direction Giving Clarifying purpose, goals, ways to proceed. <input type="checkbox"/> Information Seeking Asking questions. Asking opinions of others. <input type="checkbox"/> Information Giving Sharing opinions and information. Offering facts and judgements. <input type="checkbox"/> Elaborating Developing ideas of others. Giving examples and illustrations. <input type="checkbox"/> Coordinating Showing relationships between the ideas presented. <input type="checkbox"/> Reality Testing Testing to see if ideas and solutions are practical, logical, or workable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Over-analyzing Excessively examined detail. Split hairs, picking nits. <input type="checkbox"/> Over-generalizing Blowing situations out of proportion, to the ridiculous extreme. <input type="checkbox"/> Fault Finding Tearing apart ideas. Not seeing merit in ideas presented. <input type="checkbox"/> Premature Decision Making Making decisions and drawing conclusions before all ideas were presented or discussed. <input type="checkbox"/> Opinions as Facts Presenting personal opinions as statements of fact. <input type="checkbox"/> Changing Subject Changing topics, bouncing around, bringing up irrelevant issues.

Figure 2.

Relationship Roles & Behaviors	
Facilitating	Blocking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Praising ideas of others. Pointing out what you liked and saying how the member helped the team.<input type="checkbox"/> Harmonizing Mediating differences between others to help them find common ground in opposite points of view.<input type="checkbox"/> Norming Challenging unproductive behaviors such as not paying attention, not participating, side conversations, etc.<input type="checkbox"/> Energizing Creating enthusiasm. Expressing confidence in the groups capabilities.<input type="checkbox"/> Trust Building Recognizing/encouraging others for taking risks, expressing individuality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Rejecting Rejecting ideas based on who presented them rather than on the merit of the idea.<input type="checkbox"/> Pulling Rank Using status or expertise to get ideas accepted, rather than through discussion of the facts.<input type="checkbox"/> Polarizing Purposely taking opposite positions.<input type="checkbox"/> Dominating/excessive talking Cutting others off and interrupting.<input type="checkbox"/> Aggressing Discrediting members of the team and their ideas.<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawing Acting indifferent to the teams activity or discussion, being passive, wandering from the topic. Not involved.

ing roles tend to have high levels of openness, trust, and therefore a great deal of commitment and buy-in to decisions that are reached. Meetings where members engage in the Relationship-Blocking role and behaviors result in the members having little regard for each other and therefore little commitment to the outcomes achieved. These roles and behaviors are adapted from Robert Bales, "Task Roles & Social Roles in Problem Solving Groups" Readings in Social Psychology. 3rd. ed. 1958."

It is very important that facilitators model the Task- and Relationship-Facilitating roles. Through modeling, we are setting the example and standard for productive interaction. Early in the meeting, you will need to model these behaviors most actively. Periodically, you should "back off" slightly on the frequency and intensity of your modeling. By backing off you are trying to provide other members the "room" to engage in these behaviors. There is often a time lag, so be patient. During one of these "back off" periods a member of the group will often step up. This is the first step toward a self-facilitating

group. To help this process along I recommend that facilitators share the Task and Relationship Roles & Behaviors with their groups.

As members become more active you will also need to reinforce those who engage in Task- and Relationship- Facilitating behaviors. Simple, quick appreciation of their contribution is all that is required. Here are few a examples:

- **Reality Testing:** "Lee, that's a good question. ¿Will the customer benefit from this initiative?"
- **Harmonizing:** "Tracey, thanks for highlighting the areas of common interest that we have."
- **Norming:** "Doug's right, we've drifted and need to get back on track".

Facilitators also need to know when and how to intervene into a group's process to ensure that the blocking roles and other unproductive behaviors are minimized.

Intervention Types

Your meeting has begun. The first topic is being discussed when at the corner of the table two members lean together and confer. A few moments later, this same side-bar conversation starts up again. This time another member joins in and it becomes more animated and more disruptive. A few members are now looking expectantly at you. You need to do something; you need to intervene.

An intervention is when you take some form of action to refocus the group's process back in line with the outcomes. There are three basic types of interventions:

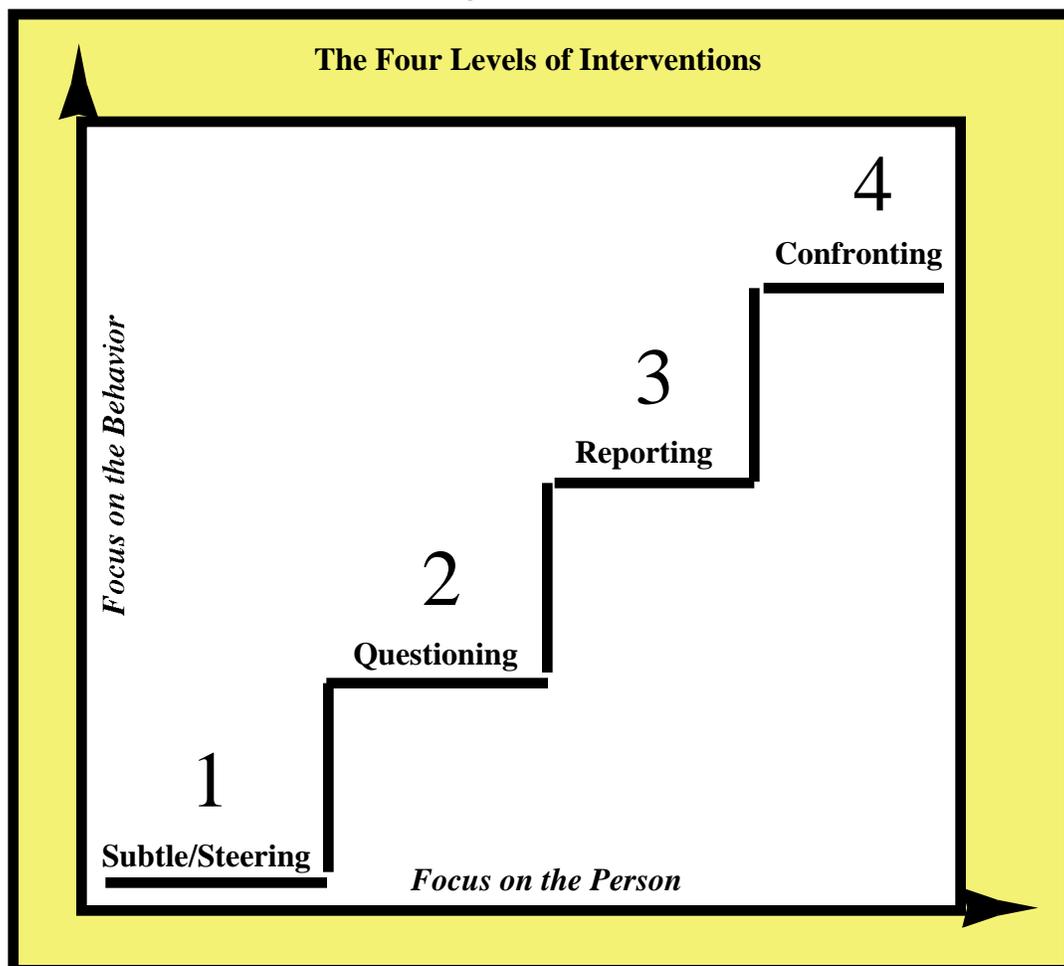
- **Interaction Interventions** improve the interactions, behaviors and roles that are operating within the groups' process. This type is what most people think of when they think of interventions. This type of intervention will be explored in greater depth.
- **Process Interventions**, sometimes called "process consultation", direct the group to use different discussion and problem-solving tools to deal better with

topics at hand. Sometimes groups get stuck because the tools that they are using don't effectively organize their contributions. Matrixes, prioritization techniques, nominal group method, post-its, sticky dots, etc., are just some of the tools that fall into the category of process interventions. While this type of intervention is not addressed in this article, many of the unproductive interactions in meeting are caused by a ponderous or misapplied process. If your Interaction Interventions are ineffective, it may be time for a process intervention.

- **TeamBuilding Interventions** improve the group's level of trust, openness and personal regard for each other in order to free up interaction.

One reason facilitators fail to intervene is that they do not know what to look for. The second reason facilitators fail to act is that they do not trust their gut, their judgement, of the issue. If you have taken the time to design your meeting as described in the first article, you should feel free to act on what your gut is telling you. If you have done your homework, trust yourself and your instincts.

Figure 3.



Intervention Strategies

The third reason facilitators often fail to take action is that they don't know how to address the issues that they have observed. They don't know how to respond to what their gut is calling for. For Interaction Interventions, there is a range of four intervention approaches or levels that we can choose from. These levels of intervention are depicted in Figure 3.

Refer to Figure 3. One way the levels of intervention are different from each other is in the degree to which the facilitator is focusing on specific behaviors (y axis). The other differentiation between levels of intervention (x axis) is how specific the intervention is to a particular member. In our training we have participants work with an unproductive practice and develop intervention "scripts" for each level.

As you overview the model, please keep in mind that these different levels are like tools in a tool kit. Different situations require different tools. With this in mind understand that levels two and three are optimal—the target zone. These levels are effective most of the time with very little downside. Envision yourself using levels two and three about seventy percent of the time. Levels one and two are appropriate at times but require a great deal of judgment as they carry greater risks.

The lowest level of intervention is "Subtle/Steering." With this level, you address neither a specific behavior or a person. What you are doing is attempting to redirect the group's interaction and to actively model productive practices.

Below are situations and examples for the Subtle/Steering intervention level:

- In the situation of a side-bar conversation, you may ask one of the people conferring off-topic a question, e.g., "Mike, do you want to add anything here?"
- In the situation of over-analysis, you may briefly affirm the member who is over-analyzing and indicate that the group move forward with the agenda, e.g., "Cheryl, that's a good evaluation of the issues, why don't we move on to the next item."
- In the situation of fault finding when one member is finding fault with another, you may break in and purposefully explore / identify the merit, e.g., "Jim, I'm intrigued by that point, can you explain it further for me?"

There is one serious pitfall to this level of interven-

tion that few people anticipate. Facilitators often intend to gently guide the group with this level of intervention. However, group members sometimes perceive the gentle intention of the Subtle/Steering intervention as manipulative or passive aggressive. Because much of your action in with this level of intervention is "covert", this level does not help the group become self-facilitating.

The next level up from Subtle/Steering, the "Questioning" intervention, is when you verbalize what your gut is telling you in the form of a question. I frequently facilitate meetings for clients and between the technical issues and the acronyms it is easy to get lost. The Questioning level is perfect for this type of situation.

Below are some examples of Questioning:

- Side-bar conversation: "Are we all focused on the same topic?" "It appears we have a few conversations going on, do want some time to explore these or do we need to refocus?"
- Changing subject or Off agenda: "Are we on an issue in line with our agenda?"
- Fault finding: "Have we fully explored the merit of this issue?"
- Premature decision making: "Did we just move on too quickly?"

On the positive side, the "Questioning" intervention actively invites group members into the facilitation process. This can be an important step toward developing a self facilitating group. On the negative side, over using the Questioning intervention level can be perceived as timid or unsure.

After Questioning, the "Reporting" intervention is when the facilitator reports on the behavior without identifying any particular member. An easy way to initiate this level of intervention is by using the stems "I think... /I feel..." Reporting is more assertive than Questioning because you are owning your responses.

Below are some examples of Reporting interventions:

- Off agenda: "I feel like we've gotten off track."
- Dominating: "I think we need to get some additional views on this issue."
- Premature decision making: "I feel like we may have moved on too quickly."

This is a very effective and versatile level of intervention. Chances are that if you are thinking or feeling something is askew with the meeting process, others are having the same response. I have found that even when the issues that I'm reporting on are not shared by others, when I'm wrong, there is high tolerance for this level of intervention.

The highest level of intervention is "Confronting." These interventions specifically call out the person and their unproductive behavior.

Below are some examples:

- Side-bar conversation: "Dick, Jane, can we have one meeting please."
- Fault finding/interrupting: "Matt, let's hear Ken out first and then evaluate the idea."
- Over-analyzing: "Joan, that level of detail is more detailed than our focus here today."

If you have developed norms with your team and worked with them on how to respond, you may very well discover that they have given you the right to use the Confronting level intervention. This level of intervention should be a last resort, as it may cause collateral damage, shutting down other members. However, if the meeting is unproductive due to one member's behavior a Confronting level of intervention may be appropriate and necessary to re-engage members that have dropped out. These are some of the reasons that judgement is so important with Confrontive interventions.

Another reason that managers who facilitate meetings fail to act/intervene is that the Confronting level of intervention is their only mental model for intervention. This being said, managers who facilitate meetings for the most part truly want to be participative. So, when they are faced with a choice of Confronting or doing nothing these managers will tend to err on side of doing nothing. As we have seen with the previous levels, there are three other very effective choices to draw upon.

Many facilitators find it helpful to view the levels of intervention as a progression, starting off at level one and working their way up to four. When making the leap from Reporting to Confronting consider calling a break in the meeting to conduct your "Confronting" level intervention "off-line".

Summary

A famous jazz musician once said something to the effect that some of his best notes he never played. After some time, once you have set the stage and modeled effective facilitation, when you feel the need to intervene, don't. Instead wait a few minutes to see if any other members step in to facilitate and actively take on responsibility for the success of the meeting. Be sure to affirm members who take these steps toward developing a self facilitating group.

In this and the previous article, you have been provided with proven tools and concepts that if applied will help make your meetings more productive. You will appreciate the renewed focus and consistency in achieving your outcomes. Participants will appreciate having at least one meeting where their time and participation are valued. Some core principles that I hope have resonated with you are:

- Designing (redesigning) the meeting will build success into the process.
- Taking the time to design the meeting is a type of rehearsal and will increase your effectiveness.
- Norms and meeting critique are important, but enrolling members in these helping mechanisms is *critical*.
- Use the interaction roles to develop a language and standards for effective meeting behavior.
- Trust your gut and experiment with the four levels of intervention.

