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Making Partnership Meetings Work: Tips on Leading an Effective Meeting

Partnerships depend on regular communication, often through meetings scheduled to address specific issues.

The meeting facilitator plays an essential role in enabling partners to use their time most effectively to reach their common objectives and strengthen the partnership.

1. The facilitator's role can set the tone for an effective meeting by:

- creating a climate in which everyone's viewpoint is welcomed and invited;
- clearly identifying the meeting's objectives and involving the group in meeting them;
- keeping the participants' efforts focused;
- intervening if procedural difficulties or problematic behaviors arise;
- helping the partners to evaluate their efforts; and
- bringing closure to each agenda item and summarizing agreements and next steps.

2. The facilitator promotes the effectiveness of the partnership meeting by:

Active listening...

Knowing how to listen is essential. When you really listen to all the partners, you show that you value their ideas and opinions. At the same time, you are able to synthesize key points and keep the discussion focused and moving. Facilitators indicate that they are listening in a number of ways: through body language, by paraphrasing the speaker's main points, and by asking clarifying questions as needed.

Directing traffic...

To make sure everyone's voice is heard, you need to make sure that only one person speaks at a time and that everyone who needs to speak has an opportunity to do so.

Regaining focus...

To achieve the meeting's objectives, you need to keep partners focused on the task at hand. You can keep them on topic by restating the issue, requesting that only one issue be handled at a time, and checking to see that everyone knows what the issues are.

Recording in real time...

To make sure that all the team members hear the same messages and that all points are heard, appoint a "recorder" -- someone who can identify key points, decisions, and actions on newsprint so that everyone can see them and refer to them throughout the meeting.

Communicating nonverbally...

As a facilitator, you communicate not only through words, but through gestures and body language as well. You indicate your interest in people's comments partly through facial expression and posture. Be aware of your body language. Also be alert to what others are saying through their body language. Their gestures, posture, or facial expressions can indicate that they have an issue they want to raise, a question they want to ask, or an agenda item they need clarified.

Encouraging...

As a facilitator, you are in a position to acknowledge contributions of individual partners. Also acknowledge the progress of the group as a whole.

Pushing...

Suggest alternative ways to handle an issue if people appear to be spinning their wheels. Remind partners about priorities and keep them on track in terms of time. Push them to explore underlying issues.

3. The facilitator shares ground rules for each meeting. Some of these may work with your partners, or you may make up others with your partners:

- Make decisions by consensus.
- Share all relevant information.
- Explain the reasons behind your statements, questions, and actions.
- Publicly test assumptions and inferences.
- Make statements, and then invite questions.
- Stay focused. Discuss the topic thoroughly so everyone has a common understanding.
- Focus on interests, not positions.
- Be specific. Use examples to illustrate key ideas.
- All members are expected to identify and solve problems.
- Challenge opinions you don't agree with without attacking the individual who expresses them.
- Together, design ways of testing disagreements and solutions.
- Maintain a sense of humor.

Bibliographic Citations: *Mastering Change: Head Start Phase III Management Institute Trainer's Manual*, 1995. *Instructor's Guide for Facilitator Training*. 1993. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.

Head Start Moving Ahead Competency-Based Training Program, Facilitation: Fundamentals of Leading Meetings, 1998. *Education Development Center, Inc., and Circle Solutions, Inc.*