

# Ann Becker

AND ASSOCIATES, INC.

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## FACILITATING A SMALL GROUP MEETING : PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES

Note: This document was developed for CFSI (Center for Financial Services Innovation). Should you have any questions about it, please contact Ann Becker at [abecker@abecker.com](mailto:abecker@abecker.com).

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#### A. General Principles of Meeting Facilitation

Meeting facilitators are responsible for managing the meeting agenda so that the discussions achieve the meeting objectives, the meeting runs on time, and discussion among attendees is widespread and robust.

Whether one is involved in/at all stages of planning the meeting agenda or not, being a successful meeting facilitator requires advance preparation, including:

- A clear understanding of the meeting purpose, objectives and desired outcome(s). These should be in writing.
- Knowledge of who will be at the meeting and relevant background information about each participant.
- Comfort with an agenda that includes beginning and ending times for the meeting, and the objective and desired outcome for each session and each agenda item.
- Sufficient knowledge of the meeting room set-up and available AV in order to feel confident that these will support the discussions and other interactions to achieve the meeting objectives.
- Knowledge of and comfort with a discussion process for each agenda item (see "Facilitation Techniques" below).
- A clear understanding of documentation necessary to capture the appropriate content and output of the meeting.

**Ann Becker and Associates, Inc.**, is a strategy consulting firm specializing in meetings, events, and organizational development for nonprofits, and can be reached at 773-955-0162 or [abecker@abecker.com](mailto:abecker@abecker.com)

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On the day of the meeting, every facilitator should:

- Arrive at the meeting room early enough to ensure that the room set-up is consistent with advance expectations and will support, rather than inhibit, achievement of the meeting objectives.
- Start the meeting on time; state the purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes and review the agenda.
- Provide an opportunity for everyone to say something (briefly!) within the opening session of the meeting.
- Manage participation. Make sure each person participates, but not all at the same time. Use friendly or humorous techniques to prevent/stop people from talking over each other.
- Follow the agenda as closely as possible. Keep everyone on task yet recognize and respond to valid “detours”.
- Listen carefully, synthesize discussion as appropriate, and identify ways to keep the meeting moving forward.
- Acknowledge all contributions even if you do not agree with some of them. Do not show deference or favoritism to any participant. If the discussion touches an area of your personal involvement, do not become defensive.
- As the meeting is coming to an end, agree on next steps, recap meeting accomplishments, and follow up responsibilities and deadlines. Ask each participant to comment briefly on a closing question, and thank them all for their contributions and help in accomplishing the meeting objectives.

Following the meeting, deliver on what has been promised to participants (e.g., meeting summary, contact information for all participants, etc.), debrief with the meeting planning team, and file documentation properly. Be timely about completion of the follow-up tasks.

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### B. Why Bother?

The many benefits of using structured facilitation techniques to organize a meeting's discussions include:

- Efficiency--generating, organizing and prioritizing many ideas in a short period of time;
- Minimizing the opportunity for any group member to influence heavily the thinking of others because of his or her position in the organization;
- Ensuring that everyone participates and that no one person dominates the discussion;
- Multiple ideas from the outset do not allow a group to fixate on one or a few ideas too early in the discussion;
- Ideas/discussion highlights are easily documented for all to see in "real time";
- Participants can see that their contributions are valued.

### C. Four Facilitation Techniques for Leading a Focused Small Group Discussion

Below are simple, step by step instructions for several facilitation techniques you might want to use. As you gain experience, you will develop a keen sense for which of the techniques will be most effective in achieving your meeting's objectives.

#### 1. Silent Generation of Ideas and Round Robin Recording

Use to generate and record quickly a large number of ideas that reflect creative thinking. By starting with a silent generation of ideas, you ensure that each person captures top of mind ideas before being influenced by others. You may find resistance to enforcing a strict "no positive or negative comment" rule during the round robin reporting. Persist!

- Pose a question to the group; make certain that it is written down for all to see;
- Allow four to five minutes for each person silently to generate a list of responses to the question;
- Circle the group asking each person to share one item on his/her list; record each quickly on a flip chart, white board or computer screen. Tell participants not to mention duplicates of any item already listed. Do not allow discussion or commentary as you are leading the round robin;
- Repeat as necessary until there are no further additions.

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### 2. Nominal Group Technique

Nominal Group Technique is an efficient process for identifying, refining, discussing and then prioritizing solutions to an issue. It is particularly effective when you want to ensure all members of a group have the opportunity for equal participation. The first step in using Nominal Group Technique is the same "Silent Generation of Ideas and Round Robin Recording" described above. The subsequent steps invite group members to build on the ideas generated and make decisions about their importance. Depending on your time frame and the complexity of the issue, you may want to generate and record the ideas in one session and discuss them in a second.

You can use Nominal Group Technique for a reasonably sized (8 to 12 maximum) group of the whole, or you can have facilitators lead several small groups that are simultaneously doing the same task. In the latter case, the material from each small group would then be shared with the group of the whole for subsequent discussion and possible decision-making.

- Follow the steps for Silent Generation of Ideas and Round Robin Recording;
- Review the list of items one at a time or in small clusters. The objectives are to clarify, asking for input from the contributor if necessary, and to combine items that the group agrees are significantly similar;
- Open the floor for discussion of the items. Depending on the volume and the potential value to the discussion, ask the group to help categorize the items.
- Close the session by asking each group member to prioritize the remaining items ("identify the top two to three most important..."). Use a show of hands or dots for voting.
- Visually capture the results so that everyone will leave with a sense of what the group felt was most important.

### 3. Brain writing Pool

Brain writing Pool is valuable for having a small group consider responses to a single question or problem from several perspectives. The technique also quickly provides rich feedback to each individual in the group, perhaps sparking new ideas about how to respond to the stimulus question.

- Each participant writes his/her name and a response to a stimulus question written at the top of a piece of paper;
- Each participant passes that sheet to the next person who briefly responds to what is on the paper by adding comments, qualifying, adding suggestions, or pointing out strengths or weaknesses;
- Once the pieces of paper have been passed full circle and are back to the originator, each participant reads or summarizes aloud the content to the group;
- You record the content highlights and lead the subsequent discussion.

This technique can also be particularly effective for developing a plan of action by using multiple questions as the stimulus questions: What are we trying to accomplish? Who is responsible? How? How will we know that we have accomplished something?

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### 4. Leading an Open Discussion

Each of the above techniques ends on a group discussion, notoriously the most difficult part of facilitating any meeting. If you wish to ensure a more complex consideration of the ideas, ask open-ended questions that invite a complex response, not a yes or no. For example, begin your questions by asking what do you think, why, how. As always, opening the discussion with one round robin will help ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate.

If you want to lead the group through a more structured consideration of specific content, for example, a report, you may structure your questions to proceed from the more general and objective consideration toward decision-making as follows:

- facts: what did you notice in *X*?
- emotions: what do you feel about *X*?
- interpretation: what are the values, meanings, purposes expressed in *X*?
- decisions: what are we going to do in response to *X*?