

## **MEETING THE SMALL GROUP CHALLENGE**

Where is the highest percentage of attendees actually awake, lively, and participating at a large meeting? Where is the stimulating clashing of minds most likely to take place? Where do attendees have an opportunity to build consensus and determine priorities? In the small group sessions, that's where.

### **The Sources of the Challenge**

As wonderful as they are, small group sessions present the meeting organizer with quite a challenge. Since small groups are often where the real work of a meeting takes place, structuring the interaction and then accurately capturing what happened for report back to the whole meeting can be the key to accomplishing the meeting's purpose. Just how, then, can the meeting organizer ensure that the work of the small groups is productive, preserved, and communicated?

### **The Keys to Meeting the Challenge**

Basic to meeting the challenge is a well thought out program design for the small groups. Whatever the task, be it brainstorming solutions to a problem or making decisions about the most viable way to proceed, the meeting organizer must carefully design both the group discussion and the written record of that discussion. Further, to manage the small group process effectively, the meeting organizer should make sure every small group is supplied with three components:

an informed, if possible very experienced and talented facilitator; one person who acts as recorder; and some type of visual aid to record information.

- ***The facilitator***

The small group facilitators are the meeting organizer's surrogates. They are the ones charged with ensuring that the group understands its task. They are the ones who control and implement the process that the meeting organizer has designed to achieve the desired outcome. To support the facilitators in performing this important role, the meeting organizer should always provide them with either a training session or detailed guidelines, or preferably both. If the facilitators are experienced, so much the better. But especially if they aren't, the meeting organizer must take the time beforehand to equip them for their responsibilities.

- ***The recorder***

Depending on the design of the discussion process, the facilitator may also be able to act as the recorder. In any event, the meeting organizer must give the person who is responsible for recording the content of the session explicit instructions about what to do. Especially if the meeting design calls for immediate report back to the larger group, it is very important that the recorder be given instructions on how to turn his or her notes into an organized presentation. All too often report backs fall short because a "laundry list" was not converted into a thoughtful and succinct presentation.

- ***The visual aid***

Overhead projectors, computer screen projectors, and electronic write boards, or even the simple flip chart or blackboard play an important role in the small group sessions. Anyone of these, filled with the group's contributions, will help the members of the group--especially those who prefer to process information visually--engage and work through the task at hand. These visual aids offer the group a tangible way of tracking and interacting with its own thought process. Information written out is tangible evidence that the synergy of the group process was at work in that small group session.

For some meeting organizers, small group sessions represent a loss of control over the meeting. Who knows what will happen in those side rooms? But for meeting organizers who understand that the small group can be the arena for a meeting's most valuable interactions, the small group session is an exciting opportunity. Properly designed, moderated and recorded, the small group is a vital ingredient in successfully achieving a meeting's objectives.