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ASSOCIATES

facilitating a culture of participation

Time is on our Side **Wayne Nelson**

Time is a valuable resource. Most people are very busy responding to a variety of demands on their time. Facilitators honour time and make good use of it. Careful preparation is one of the main key to effective use of time and critical to a facilitator's success. Careful planning honours the participants and their time as well as enabling a facilitator to be flexible. Think through the procedures you want to use and the time required for each step. If 30 people each take 2 minutes to make a comment, an hour is required. Identify the places in your plan that can be shortened if you find that you need to save time.

Schedule events with the participants in mind

Facilitators and others who arrange meetings honour the real lives of participants by scheduling events when the people are able to be present. While it is almost never possible to fit into everyone's individual calendar, it is necessary to respect them.

- Schedule events when the participants can come.
- Know the yearly rhythm of the group and avoid times dedicated to other things.
- For some groups, finding the appropriate time of day is critical.
- Consult with the participants to find the right date and time of day.
- Let people know the scheduled date with enough advance notice so they can make plans.
- For public events, it may be necessary to claim the date months in advance.
- Have a solid option in mind when beginning a scheduling conversation.

Schedule enough time to do justice to the topic

Many groups make the mistake of not allowing enough time for complex discussions or difficult decisions. Allowing enough time honours the topic and enables the group to address it appropriately.

- An agenda with too many items often result in poor treatment of some or all of the items.
- Cluster and coordinated items on a complex meeting agenda to enable a coherent thought process.
- Sessions which end with unfinished conversations lead to frustration.
- Think through the process and procedures required to deal with the topic and schedule enough time.

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- A topic may be large enough in scope and complexity to require multiple sessions. If this is necessary, be sure that they are close enough together to maintain continuity of thought.
- Use the schedule to enable the group to get to the point.

Good facilitators arrive early

Effective facilitators honour the group and its task by being on site early enough to be totally prepared. Being late without notice sends a message that you do not consider them and their work important. Everything should be ready when people begin to arrive. This enables them to focus their attention on the task at hand.

- Punctuality enables effective preparation and attention to all of the details. We find that the space always needs attention.
- Be there early to welcome participants and set up the atmosphere.
- Honour the participants by being prepared and ready to meet them.
- Being on time communicates seriousness about the task.

Begin and end at appropriate times

Every group has its own culture. While time is planned very carefully, a facilitation plan must be balanced with the group's norms and expectations. Starting precisely on time with few participants may communicate more respect for procedures than the participants. Allowing too much time beyond the declared starting time does not honour those who made the effort to be on time. While you may need to wait to begin a session, it is almost always necessary to finish at the agreed upon time. Participants often make commitments based on a scheduled ending time.

- It is often helpful to discuss starting time with those who are present.
- Select a time to begin and have a plan for involving those who come later.
- It is often helpful to plan for a gathering time at the beginning of the meeting.
- If you need to start late, it will be necessary to alter your plan in order to end on time or ask for more time.
- Do not violate peoples' commitment by running overtime without consulting the group.
- If substantial extra time is required, schedule another session.
- Let the participants know - in advance - the starting times, break times and ending times. It honours them and their participation.

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Pacing is key to effective facilitation

A good facilitator is always aware of the time. Like running a long distance race, a facilitator needs to know when to move quickly and when to slow down. Varying the pace can keep the event interesting. All of the steps in a process do not require equal time. For example, objective and reflective portions of a process often go much faster than the interpretive and decisional.

- When the group seems to need energizing, move quickly and divide your plan into short, focused sections.
- Keep a close eye on the time without becoming picky and legalistic about it. Some facilitators place their watch on the table or use a small clock.
- Sit down if you want the pace to slow down and become more reflective.
- Moving around the room will often pick up the pace.
- A slow pace is helpful for careful, deliberate conversations.
- A quick pace can be used to encourage the use of intuition.
- Balance the scheduling of breaks in relationship to the procedures, participants expectations and their level of energy.