

JUGGLING ROLES: THE KEY TO BEING A SUCCESSFUL MEETING LEADER

If you haven't done it already, there's a very good chance that at some point in the future you will have to--and it can be an eye-opening experience. To be a successful meeting leader, you must take on two separate but simultaneous roles. This challenge, coupled with the fact that not every person in the meeting will be "the perfect participant," means leading a meeting is no piece of cake. Here are some tips on how to be effective.

The Meeting Leader's Two Roles

The two major roles of a meeting leader are: 1) to keep the group working on the activity at hand in order to accomplish the meeting's objectives--the task role; and 2) to maintain constructive relations among the group members—the human relations role. When the leader remembers that both of these roles are of equal importance, the meeting will be satisfying for the participants and productive for the organization.

The Task Role

The task roles of the meeting encompass the "mechanics" of running the meeting, from start to finish, the things which the leader must do to help the meeting succeed. First, the meeting leader should set the stage in the opening comments, reiterating why the meeting was called, specific goals and objectives, an overview of the agenda, and the schedule—all items contained in the materials which should have been sent beforehand to all meeting participants.

It is also the meeting leader's responsibility to run the meeting, everything from starting and ending on time to managing the group process for each agenda item. Bringing the meeting to closure is the last of the leader's task obligations and might include recording specific outcomes, testing group consensus, summarizing the results of the meeting, clarifying next steps, thanking the group for its help, and most importantly, ending the meeting on a positive note.

The Human Relations Role

The previous point is very important because it segues into the leader's human relations role, a very important complement to the task role. A meeting leader must be able to deal effectively with individual and group feelings and attitudes which may prevent the meeting from reaching its goals. Not only does the leader need to be encouraging but he/she needs to develop the group's ability to participate, which may include having to manage "problem personalities."

Some of the ways to promote participation at meetings include:

1. Using facilitating techniques to elicit suggestions from everyone in the group;
2. Probing to clarify ideas and concerns;
3. Encouraging incomplete ideas;
4. Dealing with strong feelings that might distort the group process;
5. Acknowledging all contributions as valuable.

This list could go on and on. The important message is that the majority of the human relations tasks are common courtesies and common sense.

What It Takes

While it can take time for a person to learn how to strike that delicate balance between the task and human relations roles, we all have the potential to be effective meeting leaders. All that it takes to keep both parts of the leader's dual role up in the air is a little practice, conscious effort—and the courage to solicit constructive feedback!