HOLDING FUN AND PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS

A meeting is a time when work is done and goals are accomplished but is also a time and place where the group is building community. Building community means that the whole person is taken into consideration when the meeting is planned. Is the building accessible? Has childcare been considered? Is there time for members to socialize? Is the day and time of the meeting agreeable to the whole membership? Is everyone's voice welcome? Will members want to come back? Besides conducting business, the meeting is a time to welcome newcomers, sharpen skills, and celebrate.

MEETING PHASES AND ROLES
Meetings generally progress through a series of phases. Some groups may find that this model doesn't fit their process and may add or delete some steps. What is important is that it is useful to analyze your meetings for insight about where you're going and how to avoid potential problems.
These phases are loosely split into the following categories: planning, social interaction, agenda, structuring constructive work completion, and again, planning.

- Planning the agenda before the meeting will make the meeting go more smoothly and help to avoid minor pitfalls along the way. Agenda setters are appointed ahead of time, but can also simply be whoever showed up first. They consult with each other, gather agenda items from the last meeting and from other members and decide what needs to be accomplished.

- Don't underestimate the power of play. The first thing that people usually do when they come together is talk to each other. Don't ignore the reality or importance of members liking to be sociable with each other. Allowing time for human interaction adds to the health of your members and your meeting. If time is not taken to allow for socializing, it will most likely be done throughout the meeting in various forms and the work will not get done. Social interaction is very important for group building. Suggestions that work: Set two starting times for the meeting, one for socializing and one about 30 minutes later to start the actual business meeting. Schedule a potluck dinner an hour before the meeting. Integrate socializing into the meeting by starting out with a "round robin" check-in with each person spending a few minutes telling the group what events have occurred in their lives since the last meeting. Have a 5-10 minute break during the meeting for a small break. It could be a break to stretch, to sing, to do a quick activity to get the blood moving, or if needed, to have a quiet moment.

- An agenda is a plan for your meeting, a list of topics to be addressed. It helps if each agenda item includes information about itself- is it an announcement? Who is responsible for it? How long will it take? Make sure that the format of the agenda is visible for everyone, and that as many people as possible were able to add input into working the agenda. This helps in democratizing the process and making sure that no one will be caught unaware of a topic or a procedure

ROLES

Having people filling the roles of facilitator. vibes-watcher, timekeeper and recorder are all very helpful. The most important of these roles is the facilitator. The facilitator focuses on how to help the group work together in order to accomplish the goals of the meeting. The facilitator is not responsible for the outcome of the meeting. She works to have the members share the responsibility for what happens at the meeting. The facilitator keeps the discussion focused on the topic, clarifies points when necessary, and creates an atmosphere where everyone participates in a cooperative manner. Facilitation can be shared. It is advised that the facilitator(s) are people who have experience and/or have been through the training.

Facilitation in a nutshell

- States the question or proposal
- Asks for clarifying questions
- Keeps discussion moving and focused on one topic at a time Makes sure everyone gets a chance to speak
- Summarizes underlying agreements and/or differences
- Moves toward decision, suggesting alternative processes if needed
- Ensures implementation of a decision by whom and/or the disposition of an issue if a decision is not made
- Asks someone else to facilitate, if she wants to participate in discussion

The facilitator sets and senses the pulse of the meeting. Besides being responsible for the above items, she is aware of the mood of the meeting and needs to keep track of the time. Instead of taking on added tasks, a vibes watcher and timekeeper should be appointed, as well as a recorder. By appointing members to fill these roles, the facilitator can be more focused on the actual content of the meeting and a process for building leadership is established.

The role of the vibes-watcher is to assist the facilitator in sensing the mood of the room. The vibes-watcher is appointed and "given permission" to point out behavior or mood changes that will affect the outcome of the meeting. While the facilitator and vibes-watcher take special responsibility for the functions of the meeting, any participant can perform them when appropriate.

Vibes-Watching in a Nutshell

- Pay attention to the emotional climate and energy level of the group,
- Interrupts when necessary to make an observation suggestion
- Watches body language, facial expressions, side conversations, more than one person talking at once. Observes patterns of participation and interaction- especially helping to notice people who may have been uncharacteristically quiet or unresponsive.

The timekeeper keeps track of the time slots for the agenda items. At the beginning of the meeting, a signal is established that is used to warn a speaker that her time is running out. Speakers must agree to stick to the time allotted. By sticking to the time allotted, everyone gets to speak and we honor each other's time restraints. If an agenda item needs more time. the facilitator asks the group if more time can be allotted. The discussion may be tabled until next meeting or if given en more time the group needs to agree to extend the length of the meeting.

The recorder helps keep discussions to a minimum when clarification is needed. By referring to her notes. the recorder can clarify what has been said and statements do not have to be repeated. This position could be a permanent leadership position for the term of office or could be rotated on a regular basis. At the end of the meeting, it is a good idea to announce all the decisions that were made and who is responsible for the execution of each task.

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Consensus decision-making can be a powerful tool for building group unity and strength and for choosing wise, creative courses of action. However, if attempted under the wrong circumstances or without a good understanding of the technique, the consensus process can result in confusion, disruption or unrest in a group. Simply stated, consensus is different from other kinds of decision making because it stresses the cooperative development of a decision, with group members working together rather than competing against each other, it is a process that depends on the power within and among people rather than on power over others. The goal of consensus is a decision that is approved by all group members. Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks the decision is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, everyone had equal opportunity and responsibility to participate and no one felt unheard. Fashioning a decision that the group members can wholeheartedly implement requires respect for everyone's input and each member's active participation in the process. In "classic" consensus decision-making, every member must voice an option. Each person may agree with or without reservations, may stand aside or may block a decision. If even a single member has a strong objection to the decision (for example, it violates a deeply felt moral belief), then the individual has the power to "block" the decision. At this point, the consensus process continues and the group has further discussion to arrive at a solution to which the group approves.

WHY USE IT? - Collective intelligence and creativity always come up with better solutions than individuals or factions- Unlike voting, consensus does not readily set up "either/or", "win lose" situations; coercion and trade-offs are replaced with creative alternatives and compromise. More power and responsibility is with the group as a whole, as well as with its individual members. The effort to find consensual solutions fosters community rather than opposing camps. Decisions arrived at by consensus generally have wider group support and therefore, more successful implementation.

HOW DOES IT WORK? When a decision needs to be made the facilitator:
- States specifically the issue to be decided
- Begins a discussion with a clear proposal
- Asks clarifying questions during the discussion
- Makes sure all points of view are heard
- Checks for concerns
- If concerns are expressed, hold further discussion, again clarifying points and looking for alternative proposals. A small group may need to be delegated to refine a new proposal for future consideration.
- If no concerns are expressed, or if everyone is satisfied, test for consensus (go around the room and see if people agree)
  - To agree
  - To agree with reservations
  - To stand aside -- one enables the decision to be made, but it is on record as not participating in the consensus; this is done when someone has strong objections but does not feel that the group should not move forward.
  - To block -- one can neither support the proposal nor can the group move forward with a decision; one blocks on the grounds of principle, not preference

WHEN AGREEMENT CANNOT BE REACHED

Blocking is a statement of the great seriousness of someone's objections to a decision. It demonstrates that the group requires more time to reach consensus. The group as a whole is not ready to move ahead because some individuals are not yet represented in the group's decision. Time needs to be taken to resolve the issue. You might have to start from the beginning. The issue at hand may not be resolved at the meeting and may have to be tabled until next time. In the meantime, small committees of those who block and those who agree need to meet for further discussion, searching for a new, acceptable solution. It is important to distinguish between the power of an individual to disagree with others in the group and the power of an individual to block consensus. To disagree is at the heart of the consensus process. When one disagrees, it is her responsibility to give all relevant information, explain reasons clearly and present the information and opinions as thoroughly as she can. It is the responsibility of the others to listen, to ask questions and to seek out as much relevant information as possible. This is utilizing consensus, bringing together opinions and facts, including conflicting ones. The following are steps to move a "block" to consensus:
- Define common ground and/or goals
- Agree on process
- Participants state their perceptions of the problem
- Define and analyze the problem
- Generate alternative solutions --- (lots of them)
- Evaluate alternatives and decide on solution
- Plan implementation, with time for evaluation and feedback

Affirmation: make sure no one leaves with the situation unresolved, or at least without the next steps in place; have some fun together.

OPEN PROBLEM SOLVING / APPROPRIATE ASSERTIVENESS

The essence of Appropriate Assertiveness is being able to state your case without arousing the defenses of the other person. The secret of success lies in saying how it is for you rather than what the other person should or shouldn't do. "The way I see it..." attached to your assertive statement, helps. The skill is in speaking only from your perspective, sometimes called the" ["statement. Three ingredients for an" I "statement: The next time someone makes you angry. resist the temptation to withdraw rapidly or shout back angrily at her, him and deal with your own rising anger. Take a deep breathe. stay centered and get your mind into gear using the" I" statements.

1. When.... you raise your voice at me
2. I feel humiliated
3. And what I'd like is that I can debate an issue with you without ending up feeling hurt.

WHEN TO USE STATEMENTS PERTAINING TO YOURSELF

When you want to say something but don't know what will help, the "I" statement simply says how you see it. Don't waste time debating how the other person will or won't respond. You want to use language that won't cause a negative response. You want your statements to state what you need and not how to "fix" things. Use an "I" statement when you need to let the other person know you are feeling strongly about an issue. Others often underestimate how hurt or angry you are, so it is useful to say exactly what you are feeling ---making the situation neither worse nor better.

WHAT THE "I" STATEMENT ISN'T

Your" I" statement is not about being polite, nor should it be rude. It is about being clear. It is a conversation opener, not a resolution. The opener is to improve rather than deteriorate a relationship. Your expectations are unrealistic if you expect:

– your statement to be the answer
– to fix what's not working right away
– the person to respond as you want her to respond, right away

WHAT YOUR" I "STATEMENT IS. A realistic expectation of a personal statement made with good intent is that it will not cause any harm, it will change the current situation in some way and it will open up the possibilities you may never have realized.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT:

"If there is no conflict in a group, we are not doing our work and something is wrong!"` As we make a commitment to diversity within our organization, the differences we encounter will not only be those of race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, faith and class, but of opinions, world views, ways of learning and communicating. These differences can be a source of conflict or a source of power, richness and effectiveness. The most important thing is not to be afraid of or avoid conflict, but to see conflict as creative opportunity. If you can't agree on a solution immediately, agree on certain ground rules. For example, no one may talk about the conflict unless delegated by the group or when the entire group is together. Splintering off into small

groups within the larger one, or talking to "outsiders" is divisive and disrespectful to the group. Talking to "outsiders" may be appropriate if such a decision is agreed upon by the group and the purpose is to gather further factual information.

LEVELS OF CONFLICT: Below are levels of conflict that we have all experienced at different times. Obviously, the best way to head off major conflict is by dealing with an uncomfortable situation when it arises. When you feel uncomfortable in a group, state what makes you uncomfortable. By recognizing that a conflict exists, however small, you can prevent a crisis from developing. Be sensitive to the following levels of conflict:

- Discomfort: Nothing is said. It may even be difficult to identify what the problem is, but things just don't feel right
- Incidents: A minor outward clash occurs, without any significant internal reaction
- Misunderstandings: The parties begin to have negative images and perceptions of each other
- Tensions: Negative attitudes and stances are added to the negative images and perceptions
- Crisis: Behavior is affected, normal functioning becomes difficult, extreme gestures are contemplated or executed

CREATIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

A group can usually find more creative solutions than any one individual. Don't go away angry. Create a climate that regards conflict as natural. Agree to respect each other's difference in opinion. Be open to listening and taking responsibility for your own words and actions. Develop a process that provides for mediation when agreement cannot be met. Requirements for Conflict Management:

- A climate which regards conflict as natural rather than something to be feared, avoided or denied
- A willingness to seek resolution and agreement and a process for doing so--Respect for diversity and for difference of opinion
- A willingness to listen and to take responsibility for one's words and actions A commitment to addressing conflicts at the beginning level, before they escalate
- A provision for mediation when participants in conflict are unable to resolve it between or among themselves, especially when the conflict is harmful to the life of the group or community
- Facilitators or mediators, preferably with experience and: or training

STEPS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

1. Set the stage - Agree to try and resolve the conflict. Find a private space without distractions and agree on ground rules
2. Tell and listen to stories -Each person has uninterrupted time to tell her perception of the situation. Each person listens and paraphrases what she heard
3. Clarify issues and identify interests - Agree on what issues are to be resolved and identify each person's needs

4. Generate options - Brainstorm possible solutions and focus on what can be done, not what won't work. Be creative
5. Evaluate options - Decide what will work best
6. Reach agreements or make decisions - Fine-tune your agreements in terms of who, what, where, when and how.
7. Evaluate Options -- After generating a list of options, look at each one to see how it might work.
8. Establish objective criteria to determine if the options you have listed will work. Consider factors such as authority, time, cost, people, helping forces, hindering forces, etc...
9. Reality test each option. Predict the possible consequences if that option is selected. What is the anticipated impact on self and others?
10. Eliminate unworkable options.
11. Feel free to combine. modify and or add to the list to fashion a win-win solution.
12. Focus on interest, not positions.
13. Choose the best solution for the people involved, at that particular time.
14.

GUIDELINES FOR GOOD LISTENING

Listening is almost a lost art in America. Many conflicts occur simply because one person did not listen to another. We often are thinking of what we can say in response to someone's talking that we don't even know what was said. Below are some guidelines that are useful for whatever type of group we are part of

1. Focus your attention totally on the speaker
2. Remove distractions: don't doodle, shuffle papers, whisper to the person next to you
3. Listen for and summarize basic issues of the speaker
4. Be patient and allow silences in the conversation
5. Ask for clarification if you do not understand what has been said
6. Have an open mind when listening and when disagreeing with what is said, wait for the speaker to finish and calmly present your side

CONSTRUCTIVE WORK: The constructive work phase constitutes the bulk of the meeting, when information is shared, ideas explored and decisions made. Prior to the meeting, the facilitator or chairperson reviews the agenda items and in forms the presenters of each item their allotted time. Adhering to the times given for each agenda item is most important. The goal is to have a cooperative approach to accomplishing the tasks. Once the decisions are made and clarified, the specifics are stated as to whom will coordinate the work to be done, who will carry the tasks out and when will the work be finished. If the earlier phases, such as socializing and agenda clarification, have not been adequately covered, the constructive work maybe interrupted.

GUIDELINES FOR MEETING PARTICIPANTS: These are suggested guidelines for all participants to follow and should be agreed upon. The guidelines are stated or posted at the beginning of each meeting so that everyone will feel comfortable and know that their voice will be heard. Suggestions that work:

- One person speaks at a time
- Everyone gets to speak once before others speak again. One can choose not to speak
- Listen carefully so that points of discussion are not repeated Keep comments brief
- Listen with an open mind and heart to what each person has to say--Remember that cross talk is disruptive
- Use "I" messages and speak for yourself and not others

COMPLETION: The completion does not have to be long but it is vital. Seek completion at the end of each agenda item by having one person, often the recorder, restate the decision and check the final wording with the group. Reviewing the decision gives a sense of closure, can be an encouraging moment of group self-congratulation and can pave the way to the next agenda item. When a decision has been a hard one to make, the group members may need time to reassure one another that it was a good decision and that it feels good to be through it. Trying to push on to something new too quickly will only disrupt the natural flow of the groups process. At the end of the meeting, you'll also need a time for closure, for planning the next meeting and for a brief evaluation of the meeting. This could be done right before checkout with members stating what worked and what didn't work. keeping in mind that what is said should be constructive criticism and everyone should take responsibility for suggestions of change.