Managing Meetings in Challenging Times

By Pam Plumb, Maine Municipal Association

Pam Plumb is a consultant, facilitator and meeting planner with her company, "Great Meetings!". Pam is also a former Portland city councilor and a past president of the National League of Cities.

In the current economic climate in communities across Maine, managers and staff, boards of selectmen and Councils will be faced with hard choices and difficult decisions. Budgets are tighter than ever and your town may be facing program cuts or department reorganizations. Sounds like mission impossible. But there are some meeting tips and tools that can make meetings easier in the face of tough decisions. Here are a few ideas from a former local elected official and professional facilitator.

The value of good meeting process

Whether you are looking at staff, committee, council or public meetings, planning the meeting process carefully in advance will make your meeting easier and increase the chances for a thoughtful, productive outcome. Planning will help you have the right tools to make carefully considered decisions in a reasonable period of time. Facilitating the meeting will help you manage the stress and emotions of tough decisions. In short, process matters.

Take the time to plan in advance

Clear purpose and outcomes:

Be sure that you are clear about the purpose of the meeting. What short statement answers the question, "Why are we having this meeting?"

Next, you need to state clearly what you want as the specific outcome(s) of the meeting. Is it a list of suggestions, a decision on the budget overall, an outline of what the newly combined department would look like?
For example, instead of a memo that says: "We will meet tomorrow at 10:00 in my office to discuss the consolidation of Parks and Public Works", send an agenda that looks like this:

Parks and Public Works Meeting,
When: April 23, 10:00 – 11:30 AM,
Where: Manager's office
Meeting purpose: to look at the potential of consolidating Parks and Public Works

Desired outcomes:

• A list of the potential savings and possible costs of consolidation
• A list of the benefits and of the challenges or potential problems
• A timeline for effecting the consolidation
• A list of next steps

Then everyone will know what needs to be accomplished and they can stay focused on the

task at hand.

The right participants and background information:

Another part of your preparation includes having the appropriate, needed people at the meeting and making sure that they have the agenda and the necessary background information in advance. Without that, the meeting is likely to go nowhere.

The best process tools for the task:

There are lots of different process tools for generating ideas, evaluating ideas and then coming to a decision. Using a tool such as a particular type of brainstorming, a multivote or reflecting the sense of the group, can provide an effective way to help a group get its hands around a tricky subject. The right tool can help keep people focused on the specific task. But the tool needs to fit the task and generate the type of result that you need such as a prioritized list or a decision.

Pay attention to process during the meeting

Have someone pay attention to process:

You may not necessarily have someone who is formally standing at the front of the group as the facilitator, but it is important to have someone whose role it is to pay attention to process during the meeting. That person should be checking to see that everyone is being heard, that the group is staying on the topic, that ideas are summarized or clarified as needed, that the group is using the tools that you decided on for the meeting, that the group is coming to a conclusion. The person facilitating will likely have an opinion on the subject as well, which will mean separating clearly her roles as facilitator and participant, letting people know when she is changing roles.

If it is a large meeting, such as a big public meeting, it is more effective to have a person who is skilled in facilitation and is clearly managing the meeting.

Have ground rules or group norms:

Ground rules are a list of agreements on how the participants will act in the meeting. They can be about how participants will treat one another or about meeting procedure. When the norms are explicit and people agree to them, it will be easier to manage the meeting. You can generate ground rules from the group at the beginning of the meeting or bring in some suggested ones and check for any changes. Examples of ground rules might include:

• Begin and end the meeting on time
• People are entitled to have their own, different opinions
• Debate ideas not people *(i.e. Disagree with the idea that someone is putting forward don't attack the person for having that idea)*
• No interrupting people
• Respect time limits
• Raise your hand to be recognized (if that is how you want the meeting to run)
• Turn cell phones off

Intervene, if necessary, to keep the meeting on track:

Groups have a tendency to wander off the subject. When that happens, it is helpful to interrupt the group, acknowledge that the group has gotten off the subject, remind the group about the task at hand and bring them back to it. If the group has an off-agenda issue that it will need to deal with in the future or if there is an off-agenda idea that you don't want to lose, then capture it on a separate list called a "Parking Lot". At the end of the meeting you will need to come back to the Parking Lot and decide when to deal with the issue raised.

Value and clarify differences of opinion:

Meetings can fall apart when people with strongly held, differing points of view start to get heated and personal in their debate. It can lead to anger and make reasoned debate impossible. The facilitator, chair or any participant can help the situation by encouraging each person to articulate why he holds his opinion. What are each person's reasons, needs or data underlying that opinion? You want the group to understand the interests underlying the person's position and to separate the data from the emotion.   Then you can have the data in front of the group for their consideration rather than an argument between two people.

Two tools for evaluating ideas and deciding

Multivote

Multivoting is a simple way to take a long list of ideas and see which ideas are most important to the group. To begin with, you need to check that the participants are clear about the meaning of all the items on the list. Give the group a number of votes equivalent to roughly a third or less of the number of items on the list. Then you need to give the group a clear, specific question on which they cast their votes. "Which items on the list do you think would generate the most savings?" or "Which items do you think would improve the service the most?" Now the participants can cast the number of votes you gave them (only one vote per item) by raising hands for each item or by having people put dots by the items on the flip chart. You will see immediately by the concentration of dots or votes, which items are preferred by most of the group. Write the number of dots by each item to make it clear. You may want to take the top vote getters and do more work to reach a final answer.

To make the multivote a more deliberative tool, take time for a discussion before you vote, asking people to speak to the ideas they think are most important.

Nominal Group Technique

Nominal Group Technique is a more deliberative process, allowing time for people to influence one another and to change their minds based on new information. Working with a brainstorm list that is not too long (say under 20 items), ask the participants to rank the items on the list in priority order on their own piece of paper. Again, you need to give the group a clear, specific question on which they cast their votes. "Which items on the list do you think would generate the most savings?" or "Which items do you think would improve the service the most?" Once the participants have rank ordered the items, ask for someone who had the first item as their #1 priority to speak briefly to why he thinks it is highest, or, if no one had it #1 look for a comment from someone that had it a relatively high priority. There can be additional, brief comments for or against that priority rating, but not a full blown discussion. Continue to ask for a spokes person for each item. This process allows the group to understand why people think

one item is a higher priority than another and allows people to be persuaded to change their minds.

 When you are done having people speak to items, ask all the participants to priority order the items again and record their responses on a prepared flip chart. The scores are then tallied for each item. Remember, the items with the lowest scores show the highest priority, since 1 means first priority.

Ways to find out more about good process and facilitation

For more tools:

Great Meetings! Great Results, by Dee Kelsey and Pam Plumb, Chapter 6 Choosing the Right Tool.

For facilitation training:

University of Southern Maine, Center for Continuing Education, Certificate Course in Facilitation, April 29,30 & May 1, 2009 For more details check: http://www.usm.maine.edu/cce/detail.jsp?offering_id=100042460
 For facilitation services or to order the book: Contact Great Meetings! Inc at www.greatmeetingsinc.com or pam@greatmeetingsinc.com

Reprinted with permission from from the March 2009 issue of the Maine Townsman.

Back To Story Page