



Module 3: **Discussions and Presentations**

UNIT II: Interpersonal Leadership Skills

Facilitating a discussion meeting is different from leading an organization's monthly meeting using parliamentary procedure. The facilitator is a neutral person who gets the participants to talk about pieces of a problem and potential parts of a solution through a planned process. The neutral person is usually someone outside the group who has no vested interest in the outcome. If a group member serves as the facilitator, it's important that the role of the facilitator be distinguished from that of a member.

Effective Discussions

Discussion in its context of leadership is not just talking. There is a purpose, usually related to solving a problem or initiating some action. Think about the group members and the topic as you plan your work as a facilitator or discussion leader. For example:

1. Present the problem in a positive way, without offering any suggestions for the solution to the problem. "We have been having a small attendance lately. What can we do about it?"
2. Choose discussion topics that are familiar. If a topic that needs to be discussed is unfamiliar, provide background when you present the problem.
3. If the group is often negative, use methods of discussion that have rules which avoid making judgments on suggestions until later in the decision-making process.
4. If the group is large, use methods of discussion which break the group into small groups or have people work individually. Allow time for people to respond. Sometimes you need to even postpone the discussion to a later meeting.
5. Arrange the group so that eye contact is possible. If the group is small, a circle that includes the leader is best. If the group is large, make some decisions in small circles and then share together with the whole group.
6. If the group tends to go along with decisions, but not want to work, set up the work plan in the same meeting. Decide who will do what and when. Then if no one wants to do it, it will be apparent right away that it was a poor group decision.

What Causes "Lead Balloons"?

The term "lead balloons" refers to statements and actions that cause discussions to go off track or even stop completely.¹ Examples include:

1. **Poor Presentation of the Topic**

If the topic sounds boring, negative, or favors only one solution to a problem, people respond negatively. “We’ve been having such poor attendance, maybe we should not meet for a couple months.”

2. **Lack of Knowledge**

If no one knows enough about the subject, or there is little interest, it is hard to have a good discussion.

3. **Rejected Ideas**

Some groups habitually reject ideas, which often causes members to fear criticism. If you brainstorm a lot of ideas before beginning to judge them, group members feel more free to participate.

4. **Group Size**

If the group is large, some members won’t speak up. They may feel that their ideas are silly, won’t be welcome, or are shy about talking in front of people. Some people need time to think about how they feel and can’t decide things immediately. This may mean that just a few people will dominate the discussion.

5. **Group Arrangement**

How a group is arranged can make a difference. It is usually easier to discuss things if you can see the other members of the group. If the leader is standing behind a table and the group is seated in rows, it is more difficult for the group to freely discuss issues.

6. **Apathy**

Sometimes people “go along” with what the group is discussing just to avoid problems. They don’t like to see people upset, so they choose what they think they should favor. This can lead to the whole group continuing an unwanted project.

Active Discussion Techniques

Everyone will enjoy the group more if they take part. Active participation is essential for maximum productivity, and good group discussion can ensure this. There are many methods to help all members participate in the discussion and add to the alternatives the group can consider.^{1,2} Some examples are:

BRAINSTORMING is a method for producing a lot of ideas without judging them.

BRAIN DRAIN is similar to brainstorming, but a competition between two smaller groups to produce a lot more ideas.

NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE involves individuals giving ideas which are compiled and then rated by each person in the group, using a point system.

QUICK DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES allow for several discussions in a short time period. These are often called buzz sessions.

THE FUTURES WHEEL helps group members think systematically about the consequences of a future situation.

OPEN-ENDED STATEMENTS are unfinished sentences that group members complete and then share in a discussion.

IDEA SEARCH is a way for individuals to look over an idea carefully, trying to discover many different angles or ways to see it.

Ground Rules for the Facilitator

Facilitation is based on trust, caring and communication skills. By providing non-directive guidance, the facilitator helps the group arrive at the understandings and decisions related to its task. The group works on consensus, using the nominal group process, with no formal votes taken. The facilitator focuses on the group and its work. The role is one of guidance and assistance, never control.³

A facilitator's work deals with the content and the process of the meeting. Content facilitation includes clarifying confusing statements, identifying common threads or themes in a discussion, summarizing and organizing the ideas given, and testing for consensus by expressing the decisions that emerge from the group process. In brief, it focuses on what the individuals are talking about and what they are deciding as a group.

The process function refers to how the group is working. This includes making sure everyone gets a chance to participate, pointing out feelings that are interfering with the group's work, and helping members express and deal with their conflicts. Content and process are both basic, vital elements for achieving the group's purpose. No attempt is made to separate these two functions since, in reality, they often overlap.

Guiding a group effectively calls for careful observation and attention. The facilitator should not only listen closely to what people are saying, but notice participants' faces and posture for non-verbal cues on how the process is working. Eye contact can be used to acknowledge people's desire to speak and to let them know their ideas are being heard. It is critical to pay full attention throughout the meeting in an attempt to understand what is going on.

The facilitator should abstain from participation in partisan discussions. Good facilitation is hard work but it is critical to the shared leadership process. It is difficult to attend to the group's dynamics and needs as well as to your personal desire to express a particular idea. Keeping your distance is important for having the whole picture in view and for guiding the group towards its goals.

A safe, friendly meeting environment can help leaders achieve the planned meeting goals and objectives. Establishing ground rules that respect individual rights and responsibilities can lead to a successful meeting experience. This builds trust among participants. It is frustrating and unproductive to the participants and facilitator when opinions are not respected, individuals are criticized on a personal basis, and many views are not expressed.^{3,4}

Here are some basic ground rules for leading a meeting addressing controversial issues. Other guidelines may be added by the group.

For the Group Member:

- One person speaks at a time.
- All will share ideas in order.
- Questions may be asked to clarify ideas.
- Persons do not criticize other persons.
- Ideas may be reviewed to look for themes.
- Feelings may be expressed. They are not to be sloughed off or denied but should not dominate the discussions.
- During discussions, people should talk about positions not personalities.

For the Facilitator:

- Make sure participants are physically comfortable.
- Share meeting ground rules with participants.
- Communicate with everyone at his/her level.
- Act as the neutral person — refrain from giving personal opinion.
- Maintain a positive group atmosphere.
- Allow think time.
- AVOID: Lengthy comments.
 - Giving verbal rewards for good answers.
 - Asking questions, i.e. Who should be in charge?
 - How do you get the government to do it?
 - Asking loaded questions using value words like good, pretty, evident, population group (senior citizen, children, etc.).
 - Using a “know it all” tone of voice.

Productive Presentations

When you have something important to say, you can use several methods to make your voice count. Clarity and sincerity are more important than high sounding words. First of all, identify the problem and issues which concern you — do your homework on the facts.

Every presentation needs a purpose and a clear structure. Listeners like speeches that have a clear purpose. They prefer speeches that are organized and easy to follow, rather than ones which begin nowhere, ramble on, and end in a confused manner. Think through the information you wish to share with your audience.

Be direct and cover as much information as you can without being frantic and rushed. Talk in simple terms, use short sentences, and avoid extraneous information and digressions.

The basic organization is simple: An opening or introduction, the main body and the summary or conclusion.

Introduction

The introduction needs to accomplish two things:

1. Grab the audience’s attention.
2. Briefly set the stage for your presentation by telling the audience what your purpose is and what you are going to tell them.

A good opening technique will motivate your audience enough to listen. Challenging questions, quotations or illustrations are often effective. Let your enthusiasm show.

The Main Body

- State the facts, and be as objective as possible.
- Support your information, and be specific in your explanations. Use examples which are concise and relate to the needs and interests of your audience.
- Acknowledge and refute any contrary views if appropriate.
- Keep your speech moving. Do not spend too much time on one topic.
- Use repetition to emphasize a point.

Conclusion

- End your presentation on a positive note.
- Restate your main ideas.
- Your goal is to motivate your audience to understand, to agree with, and to act on your proposal. Make it easy to respond — state what you want done.

Almost everyone feels some stress when speaking before a group — whether you're a first timer or a veteran with lots of experience. It often helps to prepare a written text, but don't read it word-for-word. Large index cards typed in capital letters work well for many people.

Many presentations end with question-answer sessions. If you are confronted with questions you can't answer, don't try to “wing it.” Say you don't know and offer to find out. If you are confronted with hostile questioning, stay calm. Don't try to answer point-for-point. Try to answer briefly and move on to another question. After the last questions, try to emphasize your most important points very quickly.

Practice in front of a mirror, smile at the audience and speak clearly.

Developing the Content

Content is the “what” of the presentation, and answers and supports the “why” of your objectives. The following process is designed to help you develop the content for your presentation.

What to Say

Think of as many key issues or points as possible to support your objectives. This will create the framework for the presentation.

1. Review your presentation objectives and write down as many main ideas as possible on 3 x 5 cards, large sticky notes or notepaper. Write down one idea per card and, at this point, don't try to edit or organize.
2. Narrow the objectives to three to five main points.
3. Build the sub-points on 3 x 5 cards.
 - List supporting ideas or statements.
 - Give explanations, data or evidence.
 - Use enough sub-points to verify your main ideas.
 - Arrange cards to best suit your needs. Keep in mind your audience and objectives.

How to Say It

The next step is to plan “how” you are going to say it — not only the style and approach you want to use, but also what visuals, handouts and aides you will use.

Remember, “It's not what you say, but how you say it.” The best content can be destroyed by poor delivery.

Tools to Use in an Introduction

ANECDOTE: A short story to illustrate a point.

HUMOR: A great ice breaker, but use with caution.

RHETORICAL QUESTION: A question with an obvious answer. For example, “Would you like to make a lot of money with no risk?”

SHOCKING STATEMENT: It captures audience attention, but use with caution.

10 DEADLY SINS FOR PRESENTATIONS

1. **Appear unprepared.** Be prepared, but fumble enough times so that it seems you are not.
2. **Be late.** Arrive about two minutes before your meeting. Take no time to assess your audience and develop rapport. Send the message that audience members aren't important - only the content is.
3. **Improperly handle questions.** Put them off until later. Look exasperated when the same person asks many questions. Do not clarify to be sure you answer the right question.
4. **Go overtime.** Pretend you are playing the Super Bowl or seventh game of the World Series and take the game into overtime. Running past the scheduled time limit makes audiences crazy!
5. **Be unfamiliar with available information.** Do not know the names of key people, or upcoming events. Show no genuine interest and concern in the subject material and participants by ignoring fundamental information.
6. **Botch the use of audio-visuals, or don't use them at all.** Block the flipchart as you write on it, use colors that cannot be seen, stand in front of the overhead, and do not ever turn it off while changing transparencies.
7. **Seem to be off-schedule.** Keep people guessing about how you can cover only two out of 10 items on your agenda by lunch, and still finish on time. Do not tell them that is the plan.
8. **Start late.** Start late and you subliminally train your audiences to show up late, and for a bonus, you also penalize people who are on time.
9. **Appear disorganized.** Fumble everything you handle and always put the most important things in the wrong place.
10. **Avoid looking at the audience.** People want to feel connected. To prevent that from happening, look only at the walls, windows, ceiling or equipment (nothing that has eyes or feelings).

Developing Audience Enthusiasm

In any talk, discussion, or workshop, enthusiasm is the magic ingredient. Enthusiasm is what convinces your audience to see the value of the information you are sharing. Enthusiasm helps overcome inertia; helps build audience acceptance and create a feeling of enjoyment and togetherness between the listener and the speaker. Every talk, presentation or report should abound with enthusiasm. Remember, enthusiasm is contagious. Once you have it, it is not difficult to infect the audience with it.⁵

Speak from the heart! Let everyone know how you really FEEL about your material and your group members or audience.

Speaking Up — Your words are not being spoken for your benefit, but for benefit of all your listeners. Make sure everyone in the audience can hear you! Remember, they are there to listen to you — let them hear what you have to say!

Smiling — A smile is contagious. It lets everyone know you are a real person. A smile is the very essence of enthusiasm. It lets everyone know how you really feel deep inside. (Don't fake it — be SINCERE!)

Varying Your Volume — There must be a continuous variance in volume in order for your audience to recognize important points when you come to them. Voice modulation is one of the most important parts of creating enthusiasm within your listener.

Pausing — Every listener must be given an occasional rest from the bombardment of your remarks. No matter how interesting your material and delivery might be, your audience requires an occasional rest. Give it to them in the form of a pause. While you are collecting thoughts, searching for the next point, etc., let your audience rest; don't fill up such time with “and uh,” “er” or “ah.”

Speed — Make sure your words flow in the 125 to 160 words per minute time frame. However, don't speak the same speed throughout your presentation. Vary your speed as you vary the strength of your voice. Try to stay within the appropriate time frame, but vary your speed by occasionally speaking a dozen words or so more slowly than others, etc.

Change of Pace — During your presentation, try to change your pace by injecting an amusing idea, story or experience. Total abstract ideas leave an audience bored. Stories or experiences help to build interest in, and an enthusiasm for, your material! Sprinkle your talk, presentation or report with pertinent examples.

Gestures — Like a smile and voice modulation, gestures play an important part in creating enthusiasm within your listener. Avoid the “holding-onto-the-lectern-for-dear-life” position. Don't pay attention to your hands, let them react to your words naturally. If you really want to make a point, do it with gestures as well as voice modulation.

Summary

Whenever two or more people get together, discussion usually follows. In some groups, the discussions are lively and interesting, with everyone sharing ideas and having fun as well as accomplishing the task they are discussing. Other groups have discussions that are tedious and burdensome. These may be discussions to set and achieve goals or more formal presentations. Basic communication skills are combined with special techniques to fit the occasion.

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