

Chapter 9

Meetings, Meeting Facilitation and Group Support Systems (GSS)

Groups and meetings

Many organizations focus on individual job descriptions and individual incentives even though a majority of an individual's time is spent in group activities. Much of an organization's productivity is the result of group work. Groups, and meetings in particular, can, if conducted properly, be a positive force as opposed to being viewed as a necessary nuisance. Ask people at meeting – "how many of you enjoy going to meetings?" – and you will achieve greater consensus than perhaps for any other question or issue at the meeting.

Researchers have already studied groups extensively, as evidenced by the list of variables and characteristics of contained in Table 1.

Table 1 – Characteristics identified by researchers¹

<i>Member characteristics</i>	<i>Group characteristics</i>	<i>Organizational & environmental context characteristics</i>
values	work group norms	organizational environment in which the group operates
personality	socio-political structure	setting in which the group operates
gender	degree of individual dominance	group's task circumstances

¹ Unisys Corporation, *Group Support Technologies*, A study prepared for Organizational Planning and Development Division, Office Of Human Resource Development, Federal Aviation Administration, Cambridge, MA, January 1990, p. 30-32.

<i>Member characteristics</i>	<i>Group characteristics</i>	<i>Organizational & environmental context characteristics</i>
skills	group cohesiveness (including degree of cooperation vs. Competition)	spatial arrangement of the group to other elements of the environment
knowledge	density of the group (composite of group size, room size and interpersonal distances)	degree of technological support for performing its functions
experience	size of the group (small, medium, large)	degree of information support provided
age	whether the group is formally or informally defined	reward systems for the group
race	whether the group meets face-to-face or not	reward systems for the individuals
status	previous history of the group length of time the group has existed stability of the group experience with task type outcomes of previous decisions	networks to which its members belong (social, political, information-exchange, decision-making, expertise, persuasion)
socioeconomic background	purpose for which the group was formed	whether communication is synchronous or non-synchronous
competence	stage of task/purpose development	outcomes
social needs	proximity of its members	
self - esteem	group's political orientation	
motivation	type and degree of leadership	

<i>Member characteristics</i>	<i>Group characteristics</i>	<i>Organizational & environmental context characteristics</i>
ability to work in groups	group's task characteristics complexity degree of structure degree of definition formal vs. Informal planned vs. Unplanned	
attitudes about working in the group	kinds of tasks the group engages in planning creativity and idea generation idea structuring preference mixed motive consensus building communication	
attitudes about other group members	structure of the group process order of sub-tasks timing	
	depth and quality of task processing number of alternatives generated and considered criteria used for evaluation of alternatives	
	scheduling of group activities	
	length of group sessions	
	goals of the group	
	degree of group synergy	

<i>Member characteristics</i>	<i>Group characteristics</i>	<i>Organizational & environmental context characteristics</i>
	group's productivity	
	degree of type and group member participation	
	type and degree of facilitation	
	degree of anonymity	
	spatial arrangement of the group to each other	
	degree of consensus	
	time to make decisions	
	communication characteristics degree of clarification degree of information exchange non-verbal communication degree of task-oriented communication degree of socially-oriented communication	

However, many organizations have ignored paying attention to groups. Forces and trends that should convince an organization to pay more attention to groups are contained in Table 2.

Group work and meetings often involve creativity, decision-making or problem-solving. Decision-making and problem solving often begin with a creative exploration of the problem domain. The missing element in creativity that is present in decision-making is the one of Choice. The missing elements in problem solving are implementation and review.

Table 2 – Why pay more attention to groups?²

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimates of the cost of coordination run as high as 30 - 40% of the United States Gross National Product. • Studies of management work have demonstrated its group nature – as much as 80% of managerial time is spent in meetings • The fast pace of industry consolidations has resulted in changes in the size, scope and structure of organizations, resulting in a need to combine functions and support the communication of dispersed groups. • Globalization of the marketplace, due in part to the greater effectiveness and lowered cost of communication technologies, has increased the need for smoother functioning of dispersed groups that require both synchronous and asynchronous communication. • The intensification of strategic thinking and integration of functions as necessary conditions for survival has created the need for tighter inter and intra-organizational links. • The importance of product quality as a driver of market success and strategic advantage has resulted in a trend toward the use of concurrent engineering to address the need for capturing design logic across time periods and group boundaries. • The growth of knowledge has resulted in an inability for individuals to have sufficient knowledge and expertise upon which to make a decision in which sufficient confidence can be placed. Groups of specialists are becoming necessary to form complete knowledge maps. |
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Experienced managers are well aware that the outcome of decision-making (the implementation process) may not be what decision-makers intended.

² Unisys Corporation, *Group Support Technologies*, A study prepared for Organizational Planning and Development Division, Office Of Human Resource Development, Federal Aviation Administration, Cambridge, MA, January 1990, p. 11.

Table 3 – Problem Solving, Decision-making and Creativity

<i>Problem Solving</i>	<i>Decision-making</i>	<i>Creativity</i>
Intelligence Problem finding, identification, definition and diagnosis	Intelligence	Preparation Incubation
Design Identification / design / generation of alternative solutions	Design	Illumination Verification
Choice	Choice	
Implementation Of the chosen solution		
Monitoring, Reviewing and Maintaining Solution progress		

Table 3 shows the relationship between models of creativity, decision-making, and problem solving.³

A group decision-making situation has, by its very nature, unique benefits and trade-offs. On the positive side, group decision-making allows room for diverse inputs from multiple sources, bringing the ideas that may not otherwise have been considered. Group decision-making can help ensure the acceptance of a decision in an organization by including more members in the decision process, thus fostering an environment for achieving consensus. On the other hand, these varying perspectives can lead to disagreements and decision-making difficulties. Furthermore, it can be problematic to take all of the group members' input accurately into account during the decision-making process. A decision-maker sometimes has the option of choosing whether to decide alone, or in some combination with others in the organization. Some options include: (1) making the decision

³ Ibid., p 19.

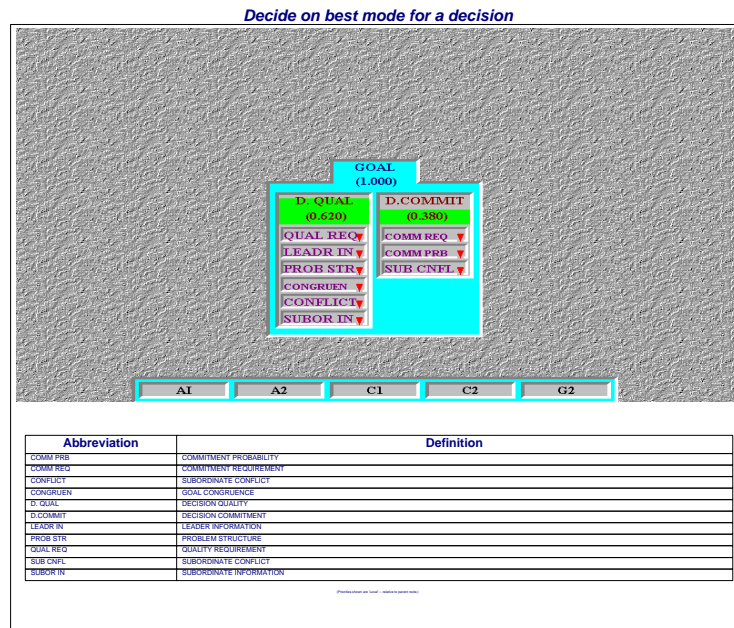


Figure 1 – Deciding on best mode for a decision

totally alone without consulting anyone, (2) collecting information from subordinates without telling about issue, then deciding alone, (3) consulting with subordinates on an individual basis about an issue, then deciding alone, (4) consult with a group about an issue, then deciding alone, and (5) meeting with a group, sharing information, and having the group decide. Some of the considerations in deciding which option is best for a particular decision are shown in Figure 1. The last option, meeting with a group and having the group decide, is sometimes considered too ‘risky’ by some decision makers. However, with the proper decision support technologies, a decision-maker can greatly improve the likelihood that the group will choose an alternative that best meets his/her objectives. The technologies must be able to cope with all of the complexity of an individual decision (discussed earlier) and then some.

In making group decisions, not only is it necessary to synthesize multiple, often conflicting objectives of a single decision maker, but a group decision requires a synthesis over numerous decision makers, each with differing values. Group decisions also tend to entail greater risk or opportunity than individual decisions.

Group decisions typically require numerous meetings. Meetings can be categorized as either information meetings or decision meetings. While both types will be discussed, decision meetings will be emphasized in this chapter.

Peter Drucker observed the following about meetings⁴:

“In an ideally designed structure there would be no meetings. Everybody would know what he needs to know to do his job. We meet because people holding different jobs have to cooperate to get a specific task done. We meet because the knowledge and experience needed in a specific situation are not available in one head, but have to be pieced together out of the experience and knowledge of several people.”

Douglas McGregor recognizes the lasting importance of meetings⁵:

“Fads will come and go. The fundamental fact of man’s capacity to collaborate with his fellows in the face-to-face group will survive the fads and one day be recognized. Then, and only then, will management discover how seriously it has underestimated the true potential of its human resources.”

⁴ Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive*, 1967

⁵ Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise*

Michael Schrage observed that⁷: “Individual genius may spot fertile ground, but it takes a collaborative community to cultivate and harvest it.” Information meetings can involve a large number of people, are typically arranged in classroom or auditorium style seating, involve one way communication with some Q&A, and emphasize content. Decision-making meetings have traditionally been limited to fifteen or fewer people, but with new meeting facilitation technologies, can involve many more people. Decision-making meetings are typically arranged in a conference room style, involve interactive communication, and may place as much or more emphasis on process as on content.

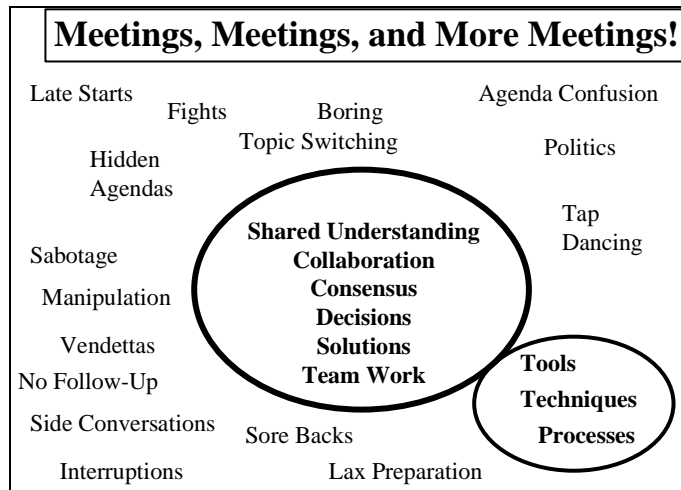


Figure 2 – Meetings⁶

⁶ Source: Meeting Facilitation Seminar notes – Peter Beck and Ernest Forman, Expert Choice Inc., Pittsburgh, Pa.

⁷ Michael Schrage, *No More Teams*, 1995

Dissatisfaction with outcomes of meetings

Numerous studies have documented widespread dissatisfaction with the process and outcomes of meetings.⁸ Researchers have identified a variety of structured procedures and guidelines that can help overcome meeting problems. External process facilitation and group support systems are two means of applying effective procedures outside of relying on meeting members themselves to do so. Research results have shown that GSS can positively impact group processes resulting in improved task outcomes and improved relational outcomes⁹. There is also evidence to indicate that flexibly applied process facilitation by external facilitators can supplement and/or enhance GSS effectiveness. In an excellent discussion of group facilitation and group support systems¹⁰, Bostrom, et al. addresses the question of how to effectively plan, coordinate, and direct the work of group members who are using a GSS, an activity they call facilitation. We summarize their discussion below.

What is a meeting?

A meeting can be viewed as a goal or outcome-directed interaction between two or more people (teams, groups) that can take place in any of four environments:

- same time/same place (face-to-face)
- same time/different place
- different time/same place
- different time/different place
- By far, most meetings today take place in the same time/same place environment. Support technologies are making the other three environments more prevalent. Phone and video conferencing for same time/different place; computerized storage and retrieval for

⁸ "Group Facilitation and Group Support Systems" Robert Bostrom, Robert Anson, and Vikki, K. Clawson, in *Group Support Systems - New Perspectives*, Edited by Leonard M. Jessup and Joseph S. Valacich, McMillan, New York, 1993.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p146.

different time/same place and, coupled with telecommunications, for different time/different place.

There are three primary roles played at decision meetings. The “leader”, or meeting owner, establishes meeting objectives, participates in meeting planning, and often has primary responsibility for the meeting outcomes. The “participants” contribute their skills, talents and experience and are responsible for generating ideas, analyzing information, helping to arrive at a decision, and often are responsible for implementing action plans. A “facilitator”, who might be the meeting leader or an external person, introduces tools, processes and techniques to help people work together.

Meeting Model

Meetings (and sequences of meetings) can last anywhere from a fraction of an hour, to months or even years. A meeting is an interaction that:

- utilizes a set of *resources* (people, technology)
- to transform the group’s *present problem* into its *desired future state* (accomplishing specific meeting outcomes)
- through a series of *action steps* (agenda)

The action steps (agenda) can be described in terms of a core set of generic *activities* for any meeting task. For example, to accomplish a particular topic, a group might:

generate information;
organize the information into alternatives;
evaluate and select alternatives; and
discuss (communicate) their actions

GSS tools and other meeting technology can be classified in terms of the activities they support, for example, brainstorming to generate alternatives, structuring to organize information, and evaluation to choose the most preferred alternative.

Meeting Outcomes: Relational as well as Task

The task, or content outcomes of a meeting concern the *what* of a meeting and are most visible. Four types of task processes include:

- generating alternatives
- choosing among alternatives
- negotiating
- executing chosen alternatives

Conflict is more prevalent in tasks, which must decide issues where there is more than one 'right' answer, tasks, which must reconcile divergent values, and interests, and competitive tasks.

Less obvious than the task outcome, but always important, are how participants *feel* about or *react to* aspects of the meeting, including:

- how participants feel about or react to the content (the task)
- feelings that group members have toward each other (interpersonal)
- rapport, openness, trust, and cohesiveness in the group
- feelings about the interactions (process) – e.g., agenda, activities, GSS
- feelings about themselves and their contributions (self)

The objective is to create and maintain positive emotions that promote working together effectively. In an effective meeting, negative affect (feeling or emotion as distinguished from cognition, thought, or action) is not avoided, but instead refocused in a positive direction. Many facilitators comment that no affect (i.e., no energy) is their biggest problem.

A Meeting Facilitation Framework

Bostrom's¹¹ meeting facilitation framework helps in understanding the objects, functions and targets of a meeting. The framework consists of *facilitation sources*, performing *functions* on *meeting targets* (see Figure 3). The **sources** can be people (a group member, a group leader or an external facilitator) or technology (a GSS). The **functions** are facilitative acts or behaviors such as organizing and energizing. And the meeting

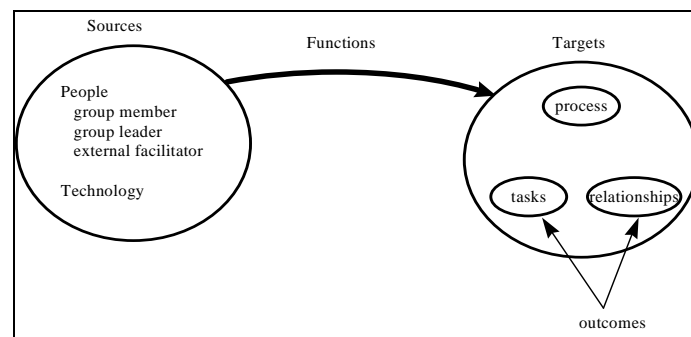


Figure 3 - Meeting Sources, Functions and Targets¹

targets are what the facilitative acts are trying to influence, including how the group does its work (process), the content of work (task) and/or how the group works together (relationships). The latter two targets, task and relationships are referred to above as the meeting outcomes.

Many meetings emphasize task outcomes. Members are brought together primarily for their **task** content expertise and judgment. The term consultant rather than facilitator is normally applied to a third party individual who is brought in with specific task expertise. Most people use the term meeting facilitation to denote intervention to the group **process** or **relationships**. As an example, a facilitation source (external individual,

¹¹ Ibid., p156.

group member, or technology) may facilitate a meeting process by suggesting that ideas be contributed in a round robin fashion or providing an anonymous brainstorming capability. However, technology can also play a content facilitation roles such as information retrieval, information processing, content analysis and content synthesis.

Lacking an external facilitator or GSS, a group member or leader facilitator who also has meeting content expertise has three responsibilities: task-related discussions, group processes, and group relationships. Bostrom claims that this triple responsibility and lack of facilitation skills is the major reason why traditional meetings are so often found to be inefficient and ineffective.

Facilitative functions are groupings of facilitative acts or behaviors and include such things as:

- organizing
- initiating structure
- summarizing
- clarifying
- harmonizing
- energizing

It is convenient to categorize facilitation functions into two general categories – **structure** and **support**. For example, an external facilitator (source) may need to influence how the group creatively interacts (process target) by applying a brainstorming technique (**structure**). The facilitator would manage (**support**) the brainstorming structure by acting as the recorder and by carefully summarizing each contribution.

Structure facilitation functions include:

- role specialization (participants are assigned specific roles such as devils advocate)
- rules to follow
- procedures

- techniques

Support facilitation functions or activities are designed to maintain, reinforce, promote and adapt the structures being used. They encourage effective behavior and deal with disruptive influences. The heart of good facilitation support is effective communication skills. Support activities in meetings are carried out through communication acts using verbal, nonverbal, and GSS channels.

Facilitation activities by meeting stage¹²

Although one person is the primary facilitator for a particular meeting, facilitation can be shared to some extent by all attendees. A GSS is a set of tools used by the facilitator and the group to help accomplish meeting outcomes. The primary facilitator, and not the GSS, must shape and guide the meeting process. The meeting process is often iterative – some meetings never “end” – but instead follow a continuing cycle of:

pre-meeting activities

meeting activities

post-meeting activities

Pre-meeting activities

It is important to design or plan the meeting before it convenes. The facilitator works with the group leader to develop a meeting design. An effective design focuses on formulating the problems and outcomes to be addressed and developing an appropriate meeting agenda of the topic activities to be undertaken. Meeting participants are selected and informed about meeting preparation. Participants’ roles (facilitator, decision makers, etc.) and meeting ground rules are established. Although critical to the success of a meeting, the pre-meeting stage is often neglected or under-emphasized in practice – one of the biggest benefits of the introduction of a GSS is that it forces people to pay careful attention to the meeting design

¹² Ibid., p150.

During Meeting activities

During the meeting both task and relational activities must be accomplished. A meeting is usually divided into three phases opening, during, and closing. When opening the meeting (meeting setup), the facilitator must clarify the meeting objectives and get agreement from the attendees about the meeting purpose, agenda, process, and ground rules. During the meeting, the primary responsibility of the facilitator is to help the group adapt and execute the agenda to accomplish the task outcomes (e.g., choose the best alternatives, or develop an action plan) and to ensure that positive affect and constructive relationships are developed and maintained. This may entail providing focus, regulating traffic, stimulating discussion and insuring participation, maintaining process flexibility, and dealing with problem people. The facilitator must remain objective and protect participants and the group leader from attack. Participants' responsibilities during the meeting include getting to the meeting on time, keeping an open mind, sharing ideas and judgments, and adhering to ground rules.

<p><u>Stimulating Discussion</u></p> <p><u>Draw people out and encourage discussion.</u> How do you feel about ... What are your thoughts on ... What prompted your reaction ... How did you feel when you learned that ... What are some other approaches to</p> <p><u>Help in gaining understanding - paraphrase.</u> Let me see if I understand you position. Are you saying that ... I don't understand. Are you saying that ... Let me paraphrase what I think you are saying What I am hearing you say is ... Is that right?</p> <p><u>Encourage Participation</u> Jim, how do you see that ... Mary, would you state that another way ... Before we go on, I would like to hear from Jane .. Jerry, do you understand what Peter said? We haven't heard from Fred. Any thoughts on this ..</p>	<p><u>Summary</u> Can someone summarize that? I have lost track. Can someone summarize? Jim does not agree? Can you summarize your ..</p> <p><u>Clarification</u> Is it clear now? Can we look at it another way? It is still not clear to me. Help me understand</p> <p><u>Sanity Check the Task with the group:</u> Is this the right problem .. Are these the most important criteria .. Are these really our goals ... Do we have all the stakeholders</p> <p><u>Other Interventions:</u> <u>Ask for Examples</u> <u>Test for Consensus</u> <u>Do a quick survey</u> <u>Take a Break</u> <u>Suggest a technique or tool</u> <u>Be supporting (this is hard work)</u> <u>Question Assumptions</u> <u>Confront Differences</u></p>
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Figure 4 – Stimulating Discussion

