

NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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TECHNOLOGY, THE MAD HATTER'S TEA PARTY AND THE HUMAN SIDE OF BUSINESS



■ Raphael E. Lapin

I recently read an article in a business magazine that touted the benefits of currently available tools and software that enable on-line collaboration across virtual teams. These programs provide an array of services from sharing and annotating a document on line, to joint whiteboarding that allows a team to mark up graphics, photos and website designs over the internet.

As I pondered the wonders of technology, I recalled the story of The Mad Hatter's Tea Party from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. At that party, the March Hare is most disturbed about his broken timepiece which he has attempted to mend by applying butter to the inner mechanism. The Mad Hatter, puzzled by the bumbling bunny's action exclaims "I told you butter wouldn't suit the works!" The hare responds "But it is the best butter" obviously perplexed as to why such a superior product had not repaired the watch.

Even though technological collaboration tools may be "the best butter", it does not always "suit the works". No matter how advanced technology is, it alone cannot replace the sophisticated interpersonal skills required for productive and profitable human interaction and business relationships.

One example is the ubiquitous workplace meeting. We have all been subjected to long, boring unproductive meetings to the extent that we dread attending them. Without applying the skills necessary for effective meeting management, collaboration technology alone will not magically transform those meetings into a paradigm of efficiency and productivity.

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effectiveness, efficiency and productivity in both virtual and face-to-face meetings.

Purpose

Before calling for a meeting, it is imperative to know, understand and articulate your purpose. Think about why the meeting is necessary and what the intended outcomes are. It may be to exchange and understand team members' perceptions or to obtain information. It could be to brainstorm ideas or to reach an agreement. Maybe to decide on an action plan or allocate resources. Whatever it is, know what you intend to achieve and then communicate that purpose to participants with utmost clarity. A clearly defined and communicated purpose will provide direction throughout the meeting.

Product

Closely related to purpose is the meeting work-product. This product should be built on the purpose of the meeting. Think carefully about the tangible product that people need to leave the meeting with. Examples of meeting products are: a list of questions to follow up on; a recommendation to present to the board; a draft framework agreement; a concrete action or strategic plan; maybe a signed contract. Once you have identified the desired product, make sure to communicate it unambiguously. An envisioned product will help enormously towards an efficient and productive meeting.

People

Just as a project team cannot deliver a successful product without specific roles assigned to the various team members, a meeting also cannot be productive without specific roles assigned to appropriate participants. To increase efficiency and productivity in any meeting, it is imperative that four roles be assigned to people who have the skills to execute them.

The first is the *facilitator* who is responsible for leading and managing the meeting. She should be skilled in communication and group process. Then there is the *observer* who observes the group process and behavior. He then reflects his observations back to

the group much like a mirror reflects an image. As such he does not make suggestions or recommendations but factually states what he is observing. The facilitator then engages the group to respond and choose how they wish to proceed based on those observations. The observer role generates group accountability and responsibility for an efficient and productive meeting. The remaining roles are *recorder* and *time-keeper*.

Process

In any business interaction, whether negotiation, resolving conflict, dialogue or meeting management, disciplined process is the efficient engine that drives a successful outcome. When you know the meeting purpose and have a vision of the meeting product, it is crucial to design a process to achieve that, and execute the process vigilantly. Depending on the purpose, components of a process might include a brief session to jointly generate and agree on ground rules for effective communication and an exchange of group members' perceptions. Other components may include an exploration of teams' conflicting needs and brainstorming options to resolve them or a creative session to generate ideas for improving a product. A process should also always include a capture of plans and assignments moving forward.

This 4-P framework for meeting management (**Purpose**; **Product**; **People**; **Process**) should become a standard that your organization demands in both virtual (in conjunction with collaboration technology) and face-to-face meetings. Using it will transform all your meetings into efficient, productive and profitable interactions and I wager that even the Mad Hatter would say that this would certainly "suit the works"!

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