HOW TO RUN A "HOT" MEETING

Running a "hot" meeting - one that could get emotional or out-of-hand – can be extremely challenging for even the most experienced of facilitators. Unchecked, emotions can often boil over and lead to explosive outbursts, rash comments, finger pointing and defensive positioning. Statements are made that compound ineffective problem solving, creating further conflict, which often leads to a vicious circle or adversary.

Managing a "hot" meeting is an art, but it is one of the most powerful skills a project manager can have, and it can be learnt. In this paper we provide a structured approach to running a "hot" meeting and suggest some useful hints to ensure your next meeting runs smoother.

PROCESS vs CONTENT

When chairing or facilitating any meeting it's important to have a thorough understanding of and be able to manage the difference between process and content.

Content - any conversation about anything (including a dispute) is a content conversation. Having an opinion; making a judgement statement; giving advice; providing information around the issue are all content interventions.

Process – this is concerned with managing or facilitating a discussion. Summarising; encouraging a participant to elaborate; asking a participant to reframe a statement are all process interventions.

The challenge is knowing which part of the meeting to be in and when. If you an independent facilitator, you are likely to have no content involvement, so should stay solely in process.

However, project managers are often expected to facilitate, whilst also having a major stake in the content. This is extremely difficult situation to manage in a "hot" meeting and it is therefore vital to have a structured approach to deal with it. This is slightly different to an agenda.

THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

The Ladder of Inference was developed by Chris Argyris as a tool to show the thinking process around jumping to conclusions based on assumptive beliefs. It also provides a useful structure to "unpack" thinking that leads to inappropriate conclusions and can help reach more appropriate conclusions.

It describes the thinking process that we go through, usually without realising it, to get from a fact to a decision or action. The thinking stages can be seen as rungs on a ladder and are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Ladder of Inference

Starting at the bottom of the ladder, we have reality and facts. From there we:

- Experience these selectively based on our beliefs and prior experience
- Interpret what they mean
- Apply our existing assumptions, sometimes without considering them
- Draw conclusions based on the interpreted facts and our assumptions
- Develop beliefs based on these conclusions
- Take actions that seem "right" because they are based on what we believe

Following the steps, enables an analysis of the process in terms of where and how assumptions and perceptions are formed and how these then become "perceived reality", and how this "reality" can vary between individuals.

As a meeting chair or facilitator the ladder can be an extremely powerful tool for process management, as it helps to ensure that actions can then be based on rational arguments as opposed to irrational blaming, defending or advocating.

As an example a facilitator can ask a process question right at the "bottom of the ladder" to get participants to identify the facts as they saw them. This is the base point of agreement or disagreement. If you don't get agreement here, a process should be agreed to determine alignment of "the facts" before you move on.

The next step is to check how the data was interpreted by the parties and so on up the ladder. Any interpretation of "the facts" can be listed as such without blame or defence and then a determination can be made as to how to deal with the interpretations and assumptions.

This process enables all parties to develop a clear process map of agreement and disagreement and helps remove emotions to reach appropriate decisions.

SIX TOP TIPS TO RUNNING A "HOT" MEETING

The following is a list of tips that are useful when running a "hot" meeting:

1. Acknowledge and honour all participants and their rights to a point of view, doing that at the outset just through conversation can be value.

2. Start with the end in mind – get agreement on the outcomes – a good way to do this is to get agreement on "what we will have when we walk out of here today". Be very clear on this – sometimes the only possible outcome will be a process to resolve a disagreement rather than a resolution. Get that on the table early.

3. Work with participants to establish some "rules of engagement" and agree a structured process. This is particularly important to do, as trying to establish control once control is lost or emotions are rife is near impossible unless there is a frame.

4. Use a white board or butchers paper to capture agreements and disagreements and map out the agreed structure of the meeting. If the points are visible to all and gaps in agreement are marked it gives focus, and a sense of joint problem solving as opposed to an adversarial or point scoring process.

5. Acknowledge emotion as natural, don't try to suppress them but work to move on. If you have established the ground rules this will be easy.

6. It is critical to make sure you have the right people in the room; there is nothing worse than coming to a critical point in a workshop only to find key decision makers aren't in the room, or a decision can't be made because the group is not effectively informed.

NEGOTIATING THE MINEFIELD

By following these top tips, using a structured process – such as the Ladder of Inference – and establishing clear roles up front, particularly your own, you should be able to successfully negotiate the process vs content minefield and effectively switch between them as necessary. ■

To discuss this topic further, contact:

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