Meetings & Consensus at SMC

Elements of a Good Meeting

Meetings are generally efficient, productive, and satisfying when:

- Everyone has a say in determining what needs to be discussed,
- The agenda and goals of the meeting are clear to everyone,
- One task is dealt with at a time,
- Everyone remains focused on the task at hand,
- Everyone's input is heard and acknowledged,
- Everyone has equal power in making decisions,
- Decisions are made which are agreeable to all and which do not result in a dissatisfied minority, and
- Everyone is clear about what has previously been decided and what is currently being decided.

Good meetings do not happen by chance. This document outlines the key elements that we use to make meetings go well.

The Meeting Participant

The meeting participant is the central element of any meeting. Every participant is either a beneficial or detrimental force. No one can simply "attend" a meeting. A participant improves the quality of the meeting when he or she:

- Reviews all meeting materials prior to arriving at the meeting,
- Arrives in time for the beginning of the meeting,
- Assists the group in staying focused on its agreed agenda,
- Maintains awareness of the meeting process (tone, timing, fairness, efficiency, etc.),
- Participates fully in discussion, being mindful to keep comments brief so that all have the opportunity to participate,
- Is solution-centered, but is not attached to any one particular solution,
- Is open to fairly examining all the pros and cons,
- Listens carefully and respectfully when others are speaking, especially when others are expressing different views,
- Voices concerns in a manner which invites constructive response and is respectful of the opinions of others, and
- Understands and participates in the decision-making process used by the group.

The Facilitator

The facilitator leads the meeting by helping the group to clarify and move through its agenda in a clear, respectful, and timely manner. The facilitator serves as a "meeting chauffeur." Typically, a facilitator:

- Develops the agenda for the meeting in consultation with all participants or representatives,
- Makes sure the meeting space is in order (chairs, lighting, audio/visual, flip charts, etc.),
- Convenes and adjourns the meeting in a timely manner,
- Helps the group move through its agenda, focusing on one item at a time,
- Makes suggestions to encourage an open and balanced flow of discussion,
- Intervenes when there are interruptions, distractions, or overly long comments
- Asks clarifying questions, and makes suggestions, but does not make decisions,
- Occasionally summarizes points of agreement and points of divergence so the group can move ahead,

- Assists the group through its established decision-making process,
- Helps the group plan follow-up, clarifying who, what, when, and where,
- Makes sure that the minute-taker has a record of all action items, and
- If necessary, relinquishes facilitator responsibilities to another when he or she needs to contribute to the meeting content in a way that makes it difficult to be fully attentive to the meeting process.

The Agenda

A meeting agenda is an outline of what items will be discussed by the group and the order of discussion. Prior to the meeting, the facilitator develops this plan in consultation with meeting participants or representatives. This advance preparation reduces the likelihood that a meeting will get bogged down by too much work, unforeseen issues, or vague topics. At SMC, agendas with appropriate attachments are distributed to all meeting participants prior to meetings. When the meeting begins, the agenda is reviewed and adjusted by the participants. Then the group can proceed with this roadmap, making adjustments as necessary.

The Minutes

Minutes are the written record of the meeting. They identify the name of the group meeting, when and where the meeting was held, who attended the meeting, who was absent, the facilitator and minute-taker. Minutes are not a transcript of everything said during the meeting, but a concise summary of key points raised, decisions made, next steps, doers, and deadlines. Minutes should use polite and clear language, and acronyms should be avoided. In order to ensure the accuracy of minutes, they are typically reviewed at the following meeting of the group, at which time corrections can be noted for the record. At SMC, minutes should be distributed to meeting participants within 24 hours of the meeting, if possible.

Decision-Making by Consensus

How do we make decisions in SMC meetings? In order to make good decisions – ones that are widely supported and based on the best thinking that each of us has to offer – we work to build consensus. Although many organizations make decisions by majority-rule, that process often squelches creative thinking and leaves a minority dissatisfied. Making decisions by consensus sometimes requires more effort, but we have found that the process and results are better for us as employees, and better for SMC.

What do we mean by consensus? Consensus is a process of synthesizing the wisdom of all the participants into the best decision possible at the time. It is not necessarily unanimous agreement and, in fact, participants may consent to a decision they disagree with. The root of consensus is consent, which means to give permission or approval. Consensus is a type of accommodation where all agree to something that they feel is best for the group. It includes supporters of a position, those who don't really care, and those who don't fully support the position but don't have enough of a problem with it to stand in the way.

How do we reach consensus? The process of reaching consensus is guided by the facilitator and involves the following steps.

- Presentation: A group member presents a proposal, usually with background information.
- Discussion: The group analyzes and clarifies the information presented.
- Ideas: Ideas are offered, reconfigured, and synthesized.
- Testing: The facilitator tests for consensus. "Is there anyone who does not approve of the group proceeding in this way? Does anyone have any serious concerns regarding this suggestion?"
- Concerns: If one or more group members have outstanding concerns, the concerns are clarified and discussed. The group works to shape a creative solution that addresses these concerns, or the group might ask for a new proposal to be brought to the next meeting. As a solution emerges, the facilitator again tests for consensus.
- Consensus: When everyone consents to the proposal, the group then clarifies how the decision will be implemented (who, what, when, how, etc.).

How can someone support consensus if they have a serious concern? A central element of the consensus process is the group's careful consideration of individual concerns. Concerns are not stumbling blocks, rather they are building blocks for crafting a decision which is wise and widely supported. If someone has a genuine concern, they should raise it for consideration and then work with the group to explore creative options. If the group does not adequately address the concern, one has the power to withhold consent, thereby requiring the group to continue looking for a more acceptable course. Generally, most members are able to support the group by offering some form of consent. Consider this range of options:

- Endorsement ("I like it.")
- Agreement, with reservations ("I can live with it.")
- Stand aside ("I don't like this, but I don't want to hold up the group.")
- Will consent if future reconsideration is built-in ("I want to include a sunset clause.")
- Formal disagreement, but willing to consent ("I want my disagreement noted in the minutes, but I will support the decision.")
- Block ("I do not consent this proposal.")

What happens if the group cannot reach consensus? Since it is not always possible to gain the consent of every group member, we have two alternatives when a decision is blocked.

- Further Exploration: The group decides to take more time to think, discuss, or research before reconsidering the matter at a later date. (The process the SMC Board uses when faced with a difficult decision is to make a decision, sleep on it, and then revisit it at a subsequent meeting. Any Board member may call for this procedure.)
- Backup Voting Procedure: The group establishes a modified majority-rule voting procedure for use in stalemate situations. (The SMC bylaws provide that if the Board cannot reach a decision via consensus, then a decision can be made with a super-majority vote of 75%.)

Why do we work to make decisions by consensus?

- Consensus gathers the experience and wisdom of all group members.
- Consensus makes a genuine effort to identify and address all significant concerns.
- Consensus values creative solutions.
- Consensus builds relationships between people and improves group dynamics.
- Consensus agreements tend to enjoy broader support and require less enforcement.
- Consensus moves us toward doing what is best for the common interest.

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SMC Meeting Reminders

To help make our meetings more efficient, productive, and satisfying . . .

Before the Meeting

- Do your homework. Read your materials in advance.
- Don't come with "the plan." Come with "an idea" and see where group takes it.
- Don't own ideas. Be ready to give them away to the group.
- Arrive and get settled early enough so the meeting can start on time.

During the Meeting

Generally

- Help the group stay focused on the agenda.
- Help the group create space for everyone to participate.

When Listening

- Be attentive and work to increase your understanding of what others are saying.
- Be patient and respectful.
- Accept that "information" comes in many useful forms – facts, opinions, hunches, ideas, feelings, mistakes and silence.

When Speaking

- Be concise.
- Express one idea at a time.
- Use "I" statements to define your needs. Take ownership of your feelings.
- Give the reasons behind your thinking.
- Be solution centered.
- Take a dose of humility.

When Deliberating

- Take a long-term view.
- Be open to outcome.
- Don't lobby your idea.
- Don't set limits.
- Look fairly and equally at all pros and cons, and encourage others to do the same.
- Learn when to let go.

After the Meeting

- Follow-up on your commitments.