

# Meeting Doctor the world

The Meeting Doctor® aims to address key issues that occur during meetings either from a relationship, management, task and/or process perspective. Its purpose is to provide prescriptions on how to improve meeting effectiveness with the understanding that there are other, equally good prescriptions available.

By Michael Goldman, M.H.Sc.

Dear MD:

*We were in a meeting today which ended pretty abruptly. The purpose of the meeting was to come to some decision around how to sort out all our wonderfully brainstormed ideas for resolving our key "compensation" issue. We all agreed that "consensus" was where we wanted to go, but with 15 people in the room, we just seemed to be getting nowhere – even within the three hours allotted (the meeting was originally scheduled for one and a half hours!).*

*My heart went out to our facilitator who desperately tried to keep us on track. Many of us seemed to have different ideas of what would make the best solution(s). Some people ended up walking out of the meeting before we came to a decision. I was pretty upset, but it was 6:00 p.m. and work-life balance is an issue for all of us. Anyway, because I brought these observations to my manager's attention, I've now been given the responsibility of running the next meeting. So much for speaking out! I'm not sure what to do? Please tell me you have some ideas?*

Signed,

**F-E-A-R!**

*(Facilitator Entering At Risk!)*

**Dear FEAR:**

Welcome to the world of facilitation! Been there, done it, bought into the stress! Guess what? After 10 years of doing it, the fear still remains, but somehow sticking to a process gets you through it. And believe you me, having some kind of structure in place to manage the discussion may be the only thing you can depend on to help you prevent a group from entering what I term "the chaotic abyss!"

The first thing that concerned me with what you said was the number of people present to drive consensus. Fifteen people under the best of circumstances can be difficult to manage, but not impossible. There were three parameters that appear fundamental to your meeting, where I believe only two can realistically exist. These parameters were time constraints, agreement by consensus, and many people. If you choose time constraints and agreement by consensus you will not be able to fulfill these parameters while having many people present. On the other hand, if you choose time constraints and many people, don't expect to easily obtain agreement by consensus.

The fact that your meeting went beyond the scheduled time is not surprising. But, being the Meeting Doctor, I can't just leave you hanging, can I? So pull up a chair, take in a few deep breaths and try this prescription on for size.

First, if you want to continue to achieve agreement by consensus with the large group at your meeting, ensure everyone is prepared to spend some more time on getting there. I find that it's not usually the time spent in decision-making that tees people off, but rather "how" the time is spent. In your e-mail, I didn't note any alluding to a process or series of steps used by the facilitator to manage the meeting. When there's a valid and reliable process in place for guiding a discussion, I notice meeting members are more likely to go the extra mile because they can see and feel out the path.

Yet the path is only one part of the journey. Knowing the outcome or where we ultimately want to be at the end of the day is equally important. Without clarity of our destination or outcome, we may end up in a place we didn't intend to be in the first place. From your statement, it appears that the outcome was clear, but the path or process wasn't. As a facilitator, you're responsible for managing two processes when facilitating – the task and the interpersonal dynamics. If the task process is unclear, it will negatively impact the group dynamic's process and vice-versa. In this column I'm specifically focusing on task management. There is a quite a lot of good information out there on managing group dynamics. One of my favourites is a book entitled *Facilitating at a Glance!* by Ingrid Bens, which spends a lot of time discussing this subject.

# of facilitation

## The Process

For your next meeting I have prescribed a method to help you structure the task of making a decision with the compensation solutions brain-stormed during your last meeting. This process is based on some assumptions, which include:

- ❖ Your group is not being forced to come up with a #1 compensation solution. There is an understanding that multiple solutions may be okay. Therefore this is a prioritizing decision-making discussion.
- ❖ Time constraints are still a factor and this meeting must result in a decision.
- ❖ That the same number of people will be attending.
- ❖ That your group has some norms in place for how they plan to interact with one another (if not, add about 15 minutes up front to your meeting to ensure the group defines these. Norms will provide you with ways to manage the group dynamics when conflict arises).
- ❖ That there is someone else in the group who is willing to assist you in facilitating a step in the decision-making process.
- ❖ That the group is willing to spend another three hours to come to a consensus. If there is some resistance, then before you follow the process below, you facilitate a discussion to determine if resistance exists and, if so, what assurances do people need so that the meeting can proceed? Document the assurances and attempt to address these during or following the meeting.

Here are the process steps I would follow, considering the above assumptions:

**Step #1:** Start the meeting by making sure that everyone is clear as to the purpose of the meeting. Test for clarity and alignment of purpose by asking some meeting members to paraphrase their understanding. Next, overview and ratify the process suggested below. When people know where they're going and how they're getting there, their participation tends to be greater as you guide them along their decision-making journey.

**Step #2:** Review the group norms or rules of interaction. If the norms are yours, seek ratification with the group to ensure clarity, alignment, and most importantly, buy-in. Make sure the group addresses "how we are going to deal with conflict, if it arises?" Make sure all members understand that consensus building will create some "groaning" as they strive towards mutual understanding and agreement.

**Step #3:** Review all the brainstormed ideas created in the last meeting. Ask people to raise any questions to address ambiguity only!

**Step #4:** Break the group up into two groups. Divide all the brainstormed ideas between the two groups. Explain to the group:

*"Since we're not being forced to choose a #1 solution, let's prioritize or sort the solutions. One method for sorting is the Impact-Effort grid. This grid allows us to sort solutions by degree of impact and effort required to implement a solution. Before we do this, however, we first have to agree on what we mean by high vs. low impact and effort."*

At this time, you want to give the group some examples of what high vs. low impact and effort could be. Below are some ideas for you to use. Be careful to choose only a few criteria to review with the members. Be prepared to accept that these criteria may not be relevant to your group and therefore new criteria may have to be defined. This, of course, may take more time, so plan for some slippage or extra time in your agenda.

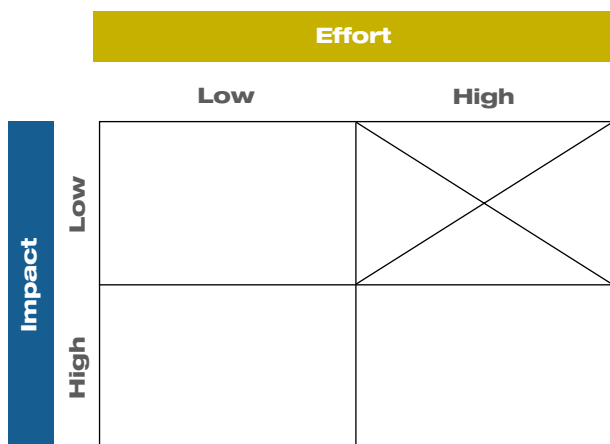
Effort Defined	
<b>Low</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ full control over time</li> <li>❖ no additional costs involved</li> <li>❖ resources required exist</li> <li>❖ have capacity</li> <li>❖ have experience and knowledge in place</li> <li>❖ information easily accessible</li> <li>❖ motivation <i>to do</i> exists</li> <li>❖ part of many of the group's personal objectives</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ requires coordinating of other's schedule outside of the work group</li> <li>❖ associated cost not in budget</li> <li>❖ have no, or limited resources</li> <li>❖ lack capacity – "already too stretched"</li> <li>❖ limited knowledge or experience</li> <li>❖ lack important background information</li> <li>❖ lack motivation <i>to do</i></li> <li>❖ not part of anyone's personal objectives</li> </ul>

Impact/Improvement Defined	
<b>Low</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ helps majority of Business Units</li> <li>❖ positively impacts large number of clients</li> <li>❖ transferrable to other tasks</li> <li>❖ meets with chair/divisional objectives; clearly aligned to organizational strategic plan</li> <li>❖ creates large productivity gains</li> <li>❖ significantly enhances the workgroup's visibility</li> <li>❖ significantly reduces expenses</li> <li>❖ significantly streamlines current operating procedure(s)</li> </ul>	<b>High</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ small number of Business Units/clientele helped</li> <li>❖ impacts small number of clients</li> <li>❖ has limited application to other tasks</li> <li>❖ meets departmental needs only and / or no, or limited alignment to organizational strategic plan</li> <li>❖ creates limited/small productivity gains</li> <li>❖ little enhancement to workgroup's visibility</li> <li>❖ little reduction to expenses</li> <li>❖ little streamlining of operating procedure(s)</li> </ul>

# facilitation

## meeting doctor

**Step #5:** Once the group has agreed on how to define "impact" and "effort", have them in their separate groups start sorting their brainstormed ideas using the grid below, drawn on their flipchart / whiteboard:



Notice that the "high-effort, low-impact" quadrant has been crossed out. Any ideas that fall in this quadrant should be eliminated, considering what could be achieved when focussing on the other quadrants.

Each group will require a facilitator to scribe ideas and ensure the sub-group follows the rules of interaction as defined at the beginning of the meeting (this is the step where you will need an additional facilitator).

This step may take quite a while as the groups discuss and agree on which quadrant each solution belongs in. Be patient and keep the group focused. Remind them to expect some "groaning" as consensus is sought. Each sub-group will want to place the solutions very specifically into each quadrant. This is because some solutions may fall in the "moderate" range between "high" and "low" and group members will want to "visually" capture this.

**Step #6:** Once each group has sorted all of their brainstormed allotment, have the sub-groups come together to present and ratify their list. Start each presentation by explaining to the group that consensus means "I can live with it". During the presentation the sub-group presenting

should be open to feedback from the other sub-group which focuses on what I "cannot live with" in terms of where you sorted the brainstormed solution. Have the presenter re-sort the solution(s) if there seems to be a consensus within the whole group.

**Step #7:** Once the presentation and adjustments have been made, determine action planning. I always begin this by suggesting that the group first focus on the "low effort, high or low impact" items. These are what Jack Welsh at GE calls "low hanging fruit" or "quick hits". Be prepared to action plan the "high-effort, high-impact" items as longer term projects. These typically take additional resources and time. My sense is that these longer term items should be "parked" and returned only if the "quick hits" cannot achieve the purpose.

**Step #8:** Celebrate the fact your group has made a decision collectively together!

Hope this process helps and you feel a little better now walking into the next meeting. Make sure you add some time for a break between steps – attending to biological needs separate the good from the mediocre facilitators!

**Michael Goldman MHS** is a professional facilitator/trainer and editor of several management books oriented to running more successful meetings. He currently is co-authoring a book about Process Management for New Organizational Leaders.

To partake in a free 15 minute consultation about your meeting issues with Michael or one of his meeting professionals, please call 416.465.9494 or e-mail him at: [goldman.dynamics@rogers.com](mailto:goldman.dynamics@rogers.com).