

Section I

Project Facilitation Basics

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN INVOLVED in a project that didn't require a meeting? Neither have we. Project meetings provide a forum for exchanging information, coming up with new ideas or alternatives, making decisions, validating work products, or just learning how to work better together. They can occur on a regular basis or on the spur of the moment. They may involve two people or thirty. But regardless, project meetings are intended to achieve results. And most times you, the project manager, are expected to make it happen—whether you've had facilitation experience or not. So in Section One, we'll give you some guidelines, insights, tool, and techniques to help you make any meeting you lead more productive.

Chapter One introduces you to the concept of the project meeting facilitator (PMF). The PMF is responsible for the end-to-end meeting process, including preparation for, facilitation of, and follow-up on the meeting and its deliverables. This chapter provides a checklist for helping you assess whether you're the right person to be the PMF and suggestions on what to do if

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you're not. Last, it provides some insight on how to assess and improve your facilitation skills.

Chapter Two takes a look at meetings—specifically project meetings—and how to transform them from an unfortunate waste of resources into a productive way of accomplishing work. It explores the topic of when and when not to hold meetings and what a productive meeting looks like. It challenges you to a higher meeting standard—meetings as well-planned, well-managed journeys that engage participants in discussion, debate, and discovery to reach the desired goal.

But like a carpenter, every facilitator needs a set of tools that will aid in artfully transforming both good wood and knots into the desired product. Chapter Three looks at some familiar yet often underutilized tools to plan and manage meeting pace and momentum, keep discussions focused, and aid in mutual understanding. Rather than discussing how to create these common tools, we've focused on how to actually *use them* in meetings to achieve the desired result: an efficient, effective project meeting.

Chapter Four wraps up the section by looking at techniques for keeping people engaged in the meeting process. This involves both getting them prepared to contribute and managing their involvement during the meeting. To accomplish this, we share insights around such topics as effectively eliciting input, keeping participation balanced, and handling difficult situations.

Remember, a meeting without actionable results is simply a waste of valuable resources. So continue to assess and improve your facilitation skills, hold meetings only when necessary, and apply good meeting practices when you do. These steps alone will move your meetings from a waste to a productive use of time.

Chapter 1

What Is a Project Meeting Facilitator?

Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.

—HENRY FORD

LEADERSHIP. MANAGEMENT. DIRECTION. RESULTS. All of these words evoke images in our minds—positive images of businesses getting things done effectively.

Let's try another word: *meetings*. Now what images come to mind? Tedious? Tiring? Boring? Unproductive? Waste of time? If you can relate to any of these images, then be encouraged. Meetings need not be a waste of precious project resources. They can be the single most effective vehicle for project collaboration—whether they are used to exchange information, confirm progress, creatively develop deliverables or solutions, make decisions, or grow as a team or individual. You just need to know how to transform meetings in your organization from an unessential drain on resources to a vital means of accomplishing project work. How do you do that? Start by adding meeting facilitation skills to your project management inventory.

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Profile of a Project Meeting Facilitator

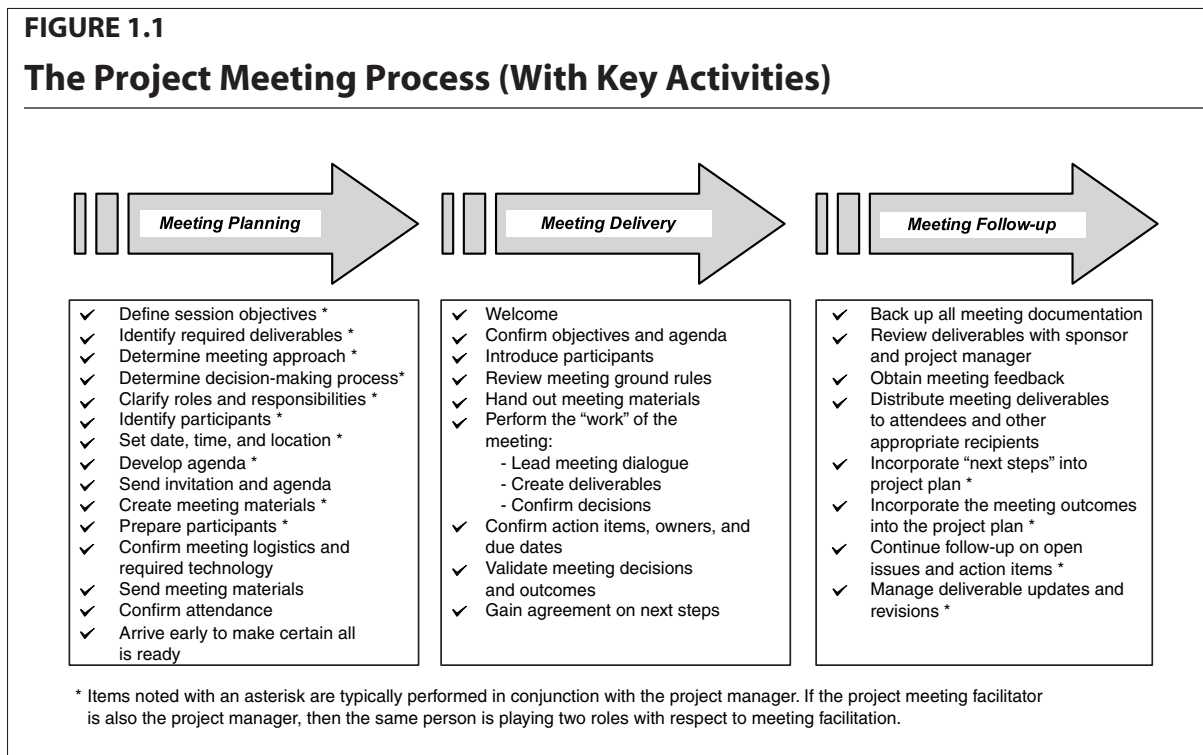
Ever get to a meeting and sit around for the first five minutes trying to figure out who's leading it? As you wait to see who will step up and take the helm, the discomfort can be obvious. Then the project manager shows up. It seems to be an unwritten assumption that project managers know how to manage not only projects but project meetings. Unfortunately, meeting planning, group dynamics, and general facilitation skills are not typically included in the project manager training program. And whether you are a project manager or a project team member, you've probably already recognized the fact that a significant part of your project experience will revolve around meetings.

So what does it mean to facilitate a project meeting? It does not mean directing, dictating outcomes, or getting everyone to see things from your point of view. It is broader than hosting or being an emcee and more involved than just moderating the discussion or monitoring time. The role of the project meeting facilitator (which we'll refer to as the PMF from here on to make reading easier) is about enabling and guiding. Thinking of yourself as a meeting facilitator will help you start to form a new mental image of your role and its associated responsibilities.

What is the role of a PMF? A meeting is often seen as the two-hour event scheduled this coming Tuesday afternoon at 1:00 PM. But a meeting is a process that requires preparation, delivery, and follow-up. And the PMF is responsible for the entire thing. See Figure 1.1 to get insight into the key activities involved in each of the three phases of the meeting process.

As this figure shows, the core responsibilities of a PMF span the scope of the end-to-end meeting process and include

- Establishing and confirming appropriate meeting objectives and desired outcomes
- Translating those meeting objectives into a productive plan for accomplishing them (that is, agenda design)



- Communicating effectively prior to the meeting to encourage participant readiness
- Ensuring that the right people are in attendance to accomplish the objectives
- Creating an environment that encourages full participation of meeting attendees
- Getting people engaged and participating productively during the meeting to achieve meeting objectives
- Communicating meeting results and incorporating meeting outcomes and next steps to maintain project momentum
- Obtaining and incorporating meeting feedback to continually improve the meeting process

These eight responsibilities describe the role of a PMF, and your ability to carry them out will lay the groundwork for meeting success. We'll give you some tips for improving your skills in these areas in subsequent chapters, but for now start thinking about the change this may require in your typical meeting

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scheduling and behavior. An effective PMF does not just show up at the meeting start time, out of breath from running between meetings. The PMF doesn't jump ship during the meeting when the going gets tough, or leave outcomes hanging after the meeting concludes. Instead, this person is in the room ahead of time, prepared to lead and guide the team in getting work done. And after the meeting, the PMF follows up effectively to ensure that outcomes are fully documented and used.

Are You the Right Facilitator for the Meeting?

All meetings are not the same; not only do they have different objectives, expectations, and deliverables, but they also vary in tone and complexity. Accordingly, you should not expect to be an effective facilitator for every sort of meeting. We each have meetings that we're more comfortable with based on our individual experiences and preferences. A meeting to facilitate senior management through project strategy and funding decisions is certainly different from a weekly team meeting to confirm project progress. And although you might be a master at status meetings, you may not be the best person to facilitate requirements development meetings. Understanding your personal strengths, preferences, and growth areas will help you determine which meetings best fit your current skills. Table 1.1 shows a range of meeting situations and the recommended level of skill needed for each.

You may ask: how do I assess my skill level? Let's look at three levels of facilitation ability: novice, skilled, and expert. As a general rule, *novice facilitators* are those who are fairly new to facilitation. They understand the basic mechanics of scheduling and agendas, but have little experience with or training in group dynamics or more advanced facilitation techniques.

Skilled facilitators have solid meeting capabilities and the competence to confidently lead when confronted with roadblocks or unexpected issues. They have probably received some

TABLE 1.1
Matching Facilitation Skills to Meeting Needs

Meeting Type	Recommended Facilitation Skill Level	What Is Required of the Facilitator
Information exchange	Novice to skilled	Sharing of information is typically a more straightforward meeting situation. Often this type of meeting presents fewer challenges regarding the dynamics of the group. Even in this less volatile meeting type, facilitators must be able to remain poised in front of the group. They must be able to present and exchange information clearly, checking for understanding throughout the process. This type of meeting can be useful for mentoring new facilitators and bringing their skills to a level where they are confident to face more challenging meeting situations.
Creative development	Skilled to expert	Meetings requiring creative development generally mean that ideas are being generated and challenged, with the result often being the creation of specific project deliverables. These may range from simple to complex in content, but the dynamic of the group in these situations generally calls for a facilitator with strong skills.
Decision making	Skilled to expert	Meetings requiring decision making can be difficult in both content and human dynamics. Facilitators must be able to maintain their composure in difficult situations, defuse conflict, and encourage participation. The ability to lead a group through healthy debate, option identification, and challenges and into final decisioning (to confirm project direction or finalize project deliverables) requires strong facilitation skills.
Coaching	Expert	Meetings that provide feedback and coaching to team members call for an expert level of facilitation skill. This requires the ability to identify areas of strength and challenge and to give instruction in the recommended steps for growth without alienating or discouraging the team members.

sort of facilitation training or have grown through years of lessons learned the hard way. They use many of the meeting tools and techniques described in Chapters Three and Four, and they are generally perceived as good meeting managers.

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You'd be considered an *expert facilitator* if, in addition to your advanced skill in facilitation, you possess specialized knowledge or experience (or both) in such fields as coaching, psychology, team development, or quality processes and tools. Your ability to apply this specialized knowledge to your group facilitation gives you additional tools for handling difficult audiences and situations and complex objectives.

Although Table 1.1 provides some general guidance, you'll need to carefully consider other aspects of your meeting situations, such as complexity of subject matter, management hierarchy, political nature of the participants, and the potential for meeting volatility, as you determine whether the meeting fits your facilitation abilities.

It is also important to consider whether the meeting participants will accept you in the role of PMF. Often it's hard for folks to separate their role as project manager from their role as meeting facilitator. Have you had previous experience with any of the participants such that your credibility as a facilitator may be questioned? If so, consider the impact this may have on meeting objectives and outcomes. If it is significant, then we suggest that you select another facilitator—one whom the group will be able to view as objective in the role as meeting facilitator. This role clarity can be tough—both for you and for the team. We watched one project manager ask her team for input, wait approximately two seconds, and then tell them what she believed to be the right answer. She was obviously struggling with the concept of directing versus facilitating. In this case, meeting results were never owned by the team, and her future credibility as a meeting facilitator was damaged.

So are you the right facilitator for the meeting? It's been said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. And when people have a bad meeting experience, they are less likely to actively participate in future gatherings. This loss of collaboration can potentially jeopardize project success. Weigh

EXHIBIT 1.1

Can I Facilitate This Meeting?

As you're preparing for your next meeting, ask yourself these questions to make sure you're the right person for the job:

Will the group be able to view me as unbiased and objective?

Can I use my knowledge and expertise to ask questions that guide the group rather than giving answers or dictating solutions?

Do I understand the expected outcomes of the meeting, and will I be able to lead the group to deliver these?

Do I feel comfortable handling the dynamics and politics of the meeting?

Does this meeting require any specialized analysis, modeling, or facilitation techniques, and if so, will I be able to apply these techniques with the group?

the cost and be sure you have the capabilities necessary to handle the meeting requirements.

Throughout this conversation, you may be asking yourself the question, "If not me, then who?" You may not have the luxury of getting someone else to act as the meeting facilitator. In those cases, we'd recommend that you do one of the following:

- Identify someone whom you consider an expert in meeting facilitation and ask that person for coaching in how to address your specific meeting situation.
- Invite one or two of the meeting attendees to assist during the meeting by supporting you in capturing information, meeting decisions, or action items, so that you can concentrate more fully on managing the group dynamics and meeting agenda.
- Practice the meeting in your head. Athletes use this visualization technique consistently prior to competition. They see the situation, think through the activities, and mentally practice the movements to formulate the experience of winning in their head prior to the actual event. Do this as a meeting facilitator. Think through the meeting. What is the best-case scenario? What is the worst-case scenario? What

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could go awry? What contingency plans should you have ready if things do not go as you planned?

These recommendations will not automatically transform you into the right facilitator for every meeting, but they will increase your level of success in difficult meeting situations.

Assessing Your Skill Level

Whether you are just beginning in facilitation or you've done it for years, it is beneficial to periodically take a step back to assess your progress and capabilities. Facilitation is neither a science nor completely an art. And there is no cookie-cutter approach to being consistently successful at facilitation. Success lies in the facilitator's ability to creatively apply skills in each group setting to accomplish the objectives at hand. So does that mean facilitation skills and competencies are indefinable? Absolutely not. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has developed a set of six core competencies by which to assess your facilitation skills (Pierce, Cheesebrow, and Mathews Braun, 2000). We've augmented that list with nine additional skills identified by our clients over the years as critical in meeting facilitation (see Exhibit 1.2).

Use this list as a tool to assess your strengths and challenges, get a baseline of your current abilities, and create a plan for improvement. First assess yourself, then ask one or more of your project colleagues to assess you with the same questionnaire. Incorporate this feedback into your improvement plan and revisit the assessment in thirty days to evaluate your growth. Mastering these competencies will give you a comprehensive foundation for successful facilitation. Your application of these competencies in meeting situations will determine your success.

Applying Your Skills

It is important to recognize that the nature of facilitation requires that we embrace what may often seem to be contradictions.

EXHIBIT 1.2

Project Meeting Facilitator Self-Assessment

Please respond to the following competencies according to the level of confidence you have in your ability to demonstrate these when facilitating project meetings.

Facilitator Competency	1	2	3	4	5
	Low		Med		High
<i>1. Ability to create collaborative client relationships</i>					
a. Developing working partnerships with the meeting sponsor and participants					
b. Designing and customizing meetings and work sessions to meet client needs					
c. Managing multisession events effectively					
<i>2. Ability to plan appropriate group processes</i>					
a. Selecting clear methods and processes that will achieve the desired meeting outcome					
b. Preparing time and place to support group process					
<i>3. Ability to create and sustain a participatory environment</i>					
a. Demonstrating effective participatory and interpersonal communications skills					
b. Honoring and recognizing diversity, ensuring inclusiveness within the meeting					
c. Managing group conflict					
d. Evoking group creativity					
<i>4. Ability to guide groups to appropriate and useful outcomes</i>					
a. Guiding the group with clear methods and processes					
b. Facilitating group self-awareness about its task					
c. Guiding the group to consensus and desired outcomes					
<i>5. Ability to build and maintain professional knowledge</i>					
a. Maintaining a base of knowledge about facilitation					
b. Knowing a range of facilitation methods and techniques					
<i>6. Ability to model positive professional attitudes</i>					
a. Practicing self-assessment and self-awareness					
b. Acting with integrity					
c. Trusting group potential and modeling neutrality					
<i>7. Demonstrating general communication skills</i>					
a. Listening actively					
b. Questioning effectively					
c. Observing					
d. Confirming meaning					
e. Summarizing					
f. Validating					

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EXHIBIT 1.2 (continued)

Facilitator Competency	1	2	3	4	5
	Low		Med		High
<i>8. Demonstrating group communication skills</i>					
a. Balancing participation					
b. Encouraging creativity					
c. Managing conflict					
d. Supporting the group process					
e. Maintaining neutrality while challenging the group					
<i>9. Demonstrating analytical skills</i>					
a. Reasoning inductively					
b. Reasoning deductively					
c. Gathering pertinent information					
d. Synthesizing information					
e. Problem solving					
<i>10. Demonstrating conceptual skills</i>					
a. Generating ideas					
b. Building connections					
c. Linking concepts					
<i>11. Demonstrating technical skills</i>					
a. Building appropriate deliverables, using the appropriate techniques					
b. Generating models					
c. Ensuring consistency and correctness					
d. Applying appropriate modeling rules and conventions					
<i>12. Demonstrating leadership skills</i>					
a. Motivating					
b. Encouraging consensus					
c. Managing expectations					
d. Fostering an environment of trust					
e. Facilitating decision making					
<i>13. Demonstrating political awareness</i>					
a. Exhibiting tact					
b. Being diplomatic					
c. Navigating the organizational hierarchy					
d. Recognizing the formal and informal organization					

EXHIBIT 1.2					
Facilitator Competency	1	2	3	4	5
	Low		Med		High
<i>14. Demonstrating management skills</i>					
a. Organizing					
b. Delegating					
c. Planning					
d. Following through					
<i>15. Demonstrating presentation skills</i>					
a. Speaking clearly					
b. Using appropriate terminology					
c. Writing legibly					
d. Being aware of body language					
e. Engaging the right presentation technology for the situation					
f. Knowing your audience					
Overall, I would describe my facilitator competencies as _____					
In the next two weeks, I will work on improving _____					

- You must step up to the challenge of being a process leader while at the same time being a servant to the needs of the group.
- You must demonstrate expertise in guiding a group effectively through a set of tasks to meet objectives, yet be flexible enough to try alternate routes if you encounter obstacles or a substantive reason to change direction.
- You must probe for clarity and insight, yet remain neutral to the content provided. This kind of neutrality does not mean being ambivalent about results; rather, it is the ability to question the group, listen for understanding, and challenge group thinking rather than providing the answers yourself. You must be comfortable with letting others find the answers.
- You must be focused both on accomplishing the task and on managing and growing the people.

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- You must understand yourself—your preferences and biases—while being keenly aware of the preferences and biases of those in your meeting group.
- You must be able to manage group dialogue while pulling out significant points to synthesize, confirm the meaning, and interpret into the correct deliverable content.
- You must be engaged with the group “in the moment,” yet thinking ahead to what is coming next.

How do you balance these seemingly conflicting elements? By viewing the world through three different lenses at any given moment—the lenses of process, people, and self (Means and Adams, 2005).

Keep an eye on the process. This process orientation means that you’re paying attention to what’s happening in the meeting—ensuring that the activities achieve the desired objectives and result in value-added products.

Stay aware of the people involved. Having a people orientation means that you engage people with active listening and questioning. You synthesize and integrate their responses, challenge ideas, get feedback, and clarify results. You also manage how people work together effectively throughout the meeting process: in planning, delivering the work session, and executing follow-up activities.

Remain aware of yourself. This self-awareness involves being conscious of your own strengths and weaknesses, preferences and biases, and being able to use or control these as appropriate to lead the work session participants in meeting their objectives.

Keeping in mind these three orientations—process, people, and self—during a meeting will help you maintain balance amid the myriad of seeming contradictions. Remember, it’s not just the gathering of knowledge but also application through diligent practice that enables skills to develop. And as a project manager you’ll get plenty of opportunities to practice. So try

new techniques, improve your observation of yourself and others, and mature in your competence by repeated practice and feedback.

Summing It Up

- Growing and developing good PMFs in your organization is one of the key building blocks to revitalizing meetings. It aids in changing the perception from “meetings are a waste of time” to “meetings are essential to getting the buy-in and focused time needed to get the work done.” Well-managed and -executed meetings are necessary for project success.
- To be effective, the PMF must be more than a meeting host or emcee. The PMF is engaged in and responsible for all aspects of meeting preparation, delivery, and follow-up.
- Just as all meetings are not created equal, neither are meeting facilitators. If you want the meeting to be successful, make sure you have the level of skill necessary to achieve the desired outcome.
- Remember that it is important for the group to ascribe credibility to the facilitator. Has the selected facilitator had previous experience with any of the participants such that his or her credibility as a facilitator may be questioned? If so, consider the impact this may have on meeting objectives and outcomes. If it is significant, then select another facilitator—one whom the group will be able to accept and trust in the role as meeting facilitator.
- Whether you are just beginning in meeting facilitation or consider yourself a pro, remember that it is always wise to assess your strengths and challenges on a periodic basis. Engage in self-assessment and request feedback from other respected colleagues. The resulting insights will benefit your professional and personal growth.
- Meetings are a triple-juggling act—managing the process, the people, and yourself—and to be successful, you must keep all three balls moving without dropping them.