

Tips for Facilitators on Establishing Consensus

By Daniel A. Martinage, CAE

Facilitating a group under ideal situations is tough, but trying to gain consensus on contentious issues where the outcome will have clear “winners” and “losers” is especially difficult. What can a facilitator do to improve his chances at arriving at a true and lasting consensus?

Full Disclosure

For a facilitator to be effective, he must be privy to all the details surrounding the issues before going into the negotiating room. What’s the history of the issues to be discussed? Have there been previous attempts at getting agreement or consensus on these issues? What were the results? Are there clearly divided camps favoring one side of the issue or the other? Who stands to gain or lose in one scenario or another? Most important, what are the deal breakers and how much room is there to compromise on these points?

Establish Strict Ground Rules

Despite the most diligent preparation, facilitators must expect the unexpected in the negotiating process and should establish early-on how specific situations will be handled. Ground rules for the session should be clear on what’s allowed and what’s not. Debating the pros and cons of issues is fine, for example, but arguments are not. Participants must fully understand that a critical part of the facilitator’s responsibility is keeping the session constructive and moving in a positive direction. If the session becomes too political or the discussion heated, it’s the facilitator’s job to call a time-out to give participants time to walk off steam and allow the room to cool down. When the session begins again, the facilitator should restate the ground rules and get commitment from everyone in the room that they agree to adhere by the rules or give up their place at the negotiating table.

Stay On Your Toes

Facilitating is tough work even in the most congenial environments. Trying to stay on top of everything that’s occurring in a tense setting requires even more skill. Learn to recognize what’s being said and what’s not. What are participants’ body language and non-verbals telling you? A room full of cross-armed, dour-faced people should send a signal that the session is not progressing well. Be aware of who’s sitting where, and be prepared to “rearrange” the room if there are obvious divisions. Take the temperature in the room often before it gets too hot by simply asking “how are we doing?”

Early in the process, be sure to have participants share with the group what their expectations are for the meeting. Refer to these expectations frequently during the meeting to ensure that you’re progressing toward meeting them. Participant’s expectations may change after the meeting is underway, and the facilitator needs to know this if he is to meet these expectations. If negotiating is stalemated, ask participants what needs to be done to move the group closer to a consensus.

Know When to Back Off

Most Middle East negotiators know some situations are just too hot to handle despite how skilled or diligent the facilitator may be. In these instances perhaps the best way to handle the situation is to back off. There's a big difference between firmly nudging reluctant participants toward compromise, and dragging them there. It's not the facilitator's role to force participants to go somewhere they don't want to go — chances are they won't stay there very long anyway. A good facilitator can go a long way in helping a group recognize why they're not achieving a consensus.

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