



MAKE MEETINGS WORK!

New Strategies for Diverse Environments

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- Have you ever felt frustrated when you throw a question out to the group and all you get are polite smiles?
- Are you perplexed when some of your brightest staff members make no contributions in brainstorming sessions?
- Were you irritated when you expected a lively discussion of the pros and cons of a policy you are considering and you get no discussion at all?

Maybe it's cultural.

While the behaviors you expect are second nature to you, they might not be to someone born in another country or socialized in a different culture. Think about your work group. What different cultures are represented in your meetings? Then take a look at the behaviors below and put a checkmark by those you expect at your meeting.

- Speaking Out
- Making Suggestions
- Reporting Problems/Concerns
- Responding to Others
- Showing Interest in Agenda
- Organizing Procedures
- Teaching Others
- Disagreeing with Boss
- Agreeing with Others
- Stating a Point of View
- Problem Solving
- Accepting Objective Feedback
- Accepting Criticism
- Asking Questions

- ____ Volunteering for Projects
- ____ Listening
- ____ Seeing Other Points of View
- ____ Taking Notes
- ____ Making Presentations
- ____ Preparing Reports
- ____ Giving Feedback [Negative and Positive]
- ____ Praising
- ____ Accepting Praise

What are your "must haves"? Might any of the behaviors on your wish list be absent because they are culturally discouraged or not practiced? For example, in many cultural groups, the boss is seen as the person with the answers. Making a suggestion to him or her might be considered imprudent or disrespectful on the part of the employee and could make the boss lose face.

To work around the variety of cultural norms you might experience that inhibit getting the desired behaviors you seek, consider doing the following:

1. LET STAFF KNOW WHAT'S EXPECTED

Once you've identified your requirements regarding meeting behavior, let people in your meetings know. Publicize these guidelines. For example, you might say, "It's our meeting and all of our ideas count. It benefits all of us when you to speak out, ask questions, and make suggestions. I'm also expecting you to listen to what others have to say. That way we get the best results."

Or, use an even more basic approach: "Please come to the staff meeting prepared with three written ideas to discuss regarding the new marketing campaign."

But be realistic. The power of cultural programming runs deep. Recognize that all the changes won't come from staff. You may have to adapt as well. For example, someone raised in a culture where praising an individual in front of others is taboo may never beam when complimented. Find other ways to let that employee know that he/she is valued and appreciated.

2. CREATE A COMFORTABLE TONE

No matter how good a relationship you have with your staff, the communication dynamics change in a more formal setting. Meetings do intimidate some people; no one wants to seem foolish in front of peers. Cultural programming just complicates the matter. Setting a nonthreatening, comfortable tone should be your first item of business.

You can reduce anxiety and increase participation by starting with a warm up that breaks the ice and gets everyone participating right away. There are a number of techniques that can help.

Ask staff members open-ended statements like:

"Your biggest concern about this new procedure is _____."

"The pros and cons of this system are_____."

"If you could make one change on the new design, it would be_____."

You can even try simple numerical evaluations such as, "On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the effectiveness of this new procedure." Short warm-up activities such as these can get people focusing and taking part.

Hint: If people are reticent to speak out in front of the whole group, you can have them respond in pairs.

3. USE SMALL GROUPS TO GET PARTICIPATION WITHOUT BREAKING CULTURAL NORMS

One of the laws of group dynamics is that the smaller the group, the greater the safety; therefore, the more the participation. The use of small groups can be your ally in working around cultural norms by sidestepping prescribed behaviors that may sabotage the success of your meetings.

For example, if you are explaining a new procedure and the whole purpose of your meeting is to trouble-shoot, one way to respect cultural "rules" and still get the information you need is to break people up into small groups where they can COLLECTIVELY list the glitches in your plan. Then no one individual has to be responsible for making a negative analysis and not everyone has to speak to the entire group. Also, keep in mind that some staff members may be self-conscious about their accents when speaking English in front of a group.

4. GROUP PEOPLE CROSS-CULTURALLY

The cliché, "Birds of a feather flock together," rings true when looking at human behavior. People DO tend to talk and to sit with those who are the most like them. The opportunity exists to have people find common new ground in ways not obvious to them.

If you want to have a cohesive work group, it is important to minimize the cliquishness that creates barriers between groups. When people have a chance to work together and talk face-to-face, they often discover how much they have in common. Cross-cultural mixing creates a chance to build bridges. It frequently has the additional benefit of producing more creative problem solving and having people learn to like one another in the process.

5. WRITE DOWN THE MEETING CONTENT

In a multilingual arena, giving people two ways to absorb the information increases your effectiveness as a communicator.

Don't depend on getting your message across only through hearing. THE "EYES" HAVE IT. Use technology, easels, wipe-off boards, overheads, or even butcher paper taped to the wall. Write down the meeting agenda and major points of the discussion. This allows people to integrate information at their own pace. This technique can work in virtual meetings as well. Incidentally, this strategy is useful for *all* workgroups to keep meetings on track.

It is hard to imagine all the cultural variations-on-a-theme which might frustrate a manager trying to run meetings in a diverse group. Remember that you can maximize your work group sessions if you are aware of cultural differences and are creative in the way you structure your meetings.

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