

Putting an end to wasteful meetings

Wasting too much time in meetings? Need your meeting to reach agreement about ways of working? Need to get a fast decision on strategy or tactics?

Many people hate meetings. Why? Because they frequently take up so much time and achieve so little. So what would team leaders, project managers and departmental heads give for a way to make collective decisions quickly and get everyone working together?

The solution is 'RapidConsensus' - the latest workshop from illumine that teaches participants how to address the issues of poorly managed meetings, characterized by contests of will, a failure to capture the collective intelligence and knowledge of the group and sub-optimal decision making.

It teaches people practical skills including, how to tap into all the experience of people in the meeting, how to create decisions from the future rather than the past, how to get people to own the outcomes of meetings and how to speed up the decision-making process.

This is an ideal workshop for leaders, managers and facilitators and if you invite your training manager to come along with you we will give them a free place on the first course in the UK.. The first date for this brand new programme is September 15th. It runs in London and costs £425. Call Sue or Lorraine on 01753 866633 to book your place.

Below is an article by Kevin Nuttall, Director of Waterfield Consulting, who founded the RapidConsensus approach. Here, he describes the main principles of RapidConsensus.

Seven Principles of RapidConsensus™

There are no problem people, only problem facilitators who can't cope with energy and creativity - Trevor Bentley, author

As a professional facilitator, I travel to many places in the world and facilitate 2,000-3,000 people a year in groups ranging from 10 to 100. It never fails to delight me that by following simple principles, people come together as a collective and achieve a consensus view on the way forward.

People have an amazing capacity to collaborate and generate creative solutions. Yet so much gets in the way of this natural human ability. The following sets out the seven principles of RapidConsensus that allows you to mine the collective intelligence and knowledge of a group. These principles have been distilled over 20 years of research and practice.

The principles of RapidConsensus are:

1. People own what they help create;
2. Work back from the preferred future scenario;
3. Parallel processing is faster;
4. Listen to everything, defend nothing;
5. 7 plus or minus 2 rule;
6. Speed improves the quality of group decisions;
7. Proximity helps create a level playing field.

1. People own what they help create.

To feel engaged and enthusiastic about an outcome people need to own it. Just telling people or imposing a decision rarely engenders real commitment.

The obvious answer is to engage people in the decision making process. The fear is often that people will make poor decisions, however our experience is that when people have the facts and are given the space to work as a collective they make great decisions. Furthermore more, implementation of those decisions is far more effective and rapid.

2. Work back from the preferred future scenario

To go from the problem to a solution without articulating the preferred future scenario has severe limitations. There are many more creative possibilities in the future scenario than in the present scenario.

Painting a picture of how the world could be is a lot more motivating and exciting than describing and analysing the current problems. As Einstein said 'The thinking that got you here will not get you out of here'. So, there is little point generating options and actions from a place you don't want to be.

3. Parallel processing is faster

The brightest most articulate people do not have all the answers. In fact a room left to its own devices will tend to work on less than 50% of the information and knowledge available in the room. The most dominant people by position or personality will control the conversation; while the more reserved people will contribute nothing or little and have 'car park' agendas, that is, they will have discussions later about why what was decided will not work.

By having the same question addressed concurrently by separate groups greatly speeds up the ability of the group to process information. I always have high confidence in a group response if three or more sub-groups have independently come to the same conclusion.

4. Listen to everything, defend nothing

A facilitator's role is to remain neutral and listen to everything said and feed it back accurately to the group. People come into the room from many different viewing platforms. For example production, marketing, sales, maintenance, administration...all see the world differently. However, it is the culmination of all these perspectives and interdependencies which provides a whole view of the situation.

Providing a process that allows all these views to be heard is a fundamental part of the RapidConsensus process. This allows the group to work on the best information and knowledge available to the group.

In order to do this the facilitator has to operate as an open conduit. This means you are 100% present for the group and able to remain open to all the input from the group. Things will be said that you may not agree with. Yet to maintain the open dialogue you must not defend a view but treat all views with equal respect and space.

5. The 7 plus or minus 2 Rule

The combinations and permutations of diverse groups' opinions seem incalculable, yet the underlying issues typically fit the "7 plus or minus 2 Rule". This is even true with the most complex areas which can be distilled to 5 to 9 topics. From this high level topic map the group is able to see the interdependencies and possible ways forward.

Why 7 plus or minus 2? Research suggests the human brain categorises subjects into a relatively small set so it can remember, process and use information. A group is a collection of human brains and displays this same effective categorising capability.

We use a topic mapping technique to diagrammatically cluster the group's inputs. The mapping is simple to learn and allows seemingly random input to naturally collect into the 7 plus or minus 2 topics.

6. Speed improves the quality of group decisions

People have different speeds of thinking and interacting yet we all have a rapid cognition capability that works best under time pressure. The first intuitive response is most times better than a long drawn out analytical process.

As the room becomes a safe place to explore ideas, the ability of the room to process complex information and make decisions also speeds up.

The other benefit speed brings, is that the group starts accessing the lateral leaps in thinking that leads to creative ideas. Groups surprise themselves with the speed with which they can collectively process information and make decisions. Experience has shown us that the quality of these decisions is high, as after the workshop more progress and break-throughs are made.

7. Proximity helps creates a level playing field

My mentor in this work used to say 'Facilitation is about helping unequal human beings to be equally human.' In different contexts we are unequal in many ways; by position, by age, by experience, by knowledge...however we are all equally human.

The best dialogue comes when people stop hiding behind their roles and start talking as on the same level.

To create this level playing field people need to be physically close to one another. A good test is that they are able to put their arms out so their fingers can still touch. Without this proximity, effective human dialogue breaks down. This means most large meeting room tables are a disaster for human to human interaction. The way we overcome this is to break larger groups into small tables and have them work as small clusters of typically 4 to 7 people.

Once people are comfortable with the group process you can 'maximum mix' the groups so each group becomes a microcosm of the whole. It is really interesting to see Board members stop and listen to junior staff and realise wisdom can be found everywhere.

Conclusion

Someone once rather cynically said "people working in groups is the biggest waste of resources on the planet today" yet by following some simple principles groups can become an amazingly effective resource.

I think all people want to work in collaborative and creative environments where they feel heard and valued. The RapidConsensus approach gives people an experience that they want to make the norm for their professional and personal lives.