DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE AREA NETWORK MEETING

Before planning your next Area Network Meeting, please consider your own behaviour in large groups. How do you feel when you are a participant in a large meeting? What are some of your concerns or fears? Is your behaviour in large groups different from your typical behaviour in smaller groups? Thinking about these issues will help you plan your meetings in a way that will facilitate participation and open dialogue.

The Challenge of Large Group Meetings

The psychological processes of large groups are different from those of small groups. Large groups are, by definition, too large for people to have face-to-face interaction. In small groups of up to a dozen people, each person has a reasonable chance to speak, be listened to, and be responded to. In large groups, conversation and responding to others is not possible. Typically, some people say quite a lot while others are silent. This creates a dilemma. In social settings, most people want to be recognized as individuals who have worth and a unique contribution to make. In a small group we do this through verbal contributions. People get to know us and what we have to contribute.

In a large group, however, people have a problem with feeling recognized, because it is difficult to get an opportunity to speak. This is a structural difficulty created by the time available and the number of people who want to use that time. In addition, the sheer number of people who are present is intimidating to some, especially those who prefer one-to-one interaction. Even those who do speak in large groups will not be able to know the reactions of others as easily as when fewer people are present.

What frequently happens in large groups is a few people do most of the talking while others experience “the tyranny of the few”. Those who remain silent take on the role of quiet participation. It is easy for those who remain silent to grow more and more passive and to feel more and more marginal to the group. Research indicates that as numbers increase the personal sense of responsibility of the outcomes of the group decreases and this affects behaviour.

Yet, much of the important work which needs to be done in communities and organizations today involves bringing large numbers of people together to look at a problem like tobacco use from multiple perspectives. How can we use what others have learned about resolving the critical issues in large group dynamics and design effective Area Network Meetings?

PARTICIPATIVE MEETING DESIGN

Conducting Meetings Where People Participate and Feel Engaged

Fruitful meetings are those where the members actively participate. People who are engaged in discussions and actively listening to their colleagues are more creative and effective. The following tips will help you to design a meeting environment that encourages participation and keeps people involved.

- Whenever possible, have people seated in small table groups of 6 to 8 people. This type of seating arrangement allows them to listen to presentations and have face-to-face interaction with others at their table.
- Table assignments can play an important role in achieving the meeting objectives. For example, seating people in heterogeneous groups provides the opportunity to see their tobacco control work from other perspectives. Depending on the objective of the meeting, table groups can also be assigned by geographic area, by modality, or by interest in specific issues.
- Give explicit directions that allow everyone in the table group to have a minute to give his or her views before any discussion begins within the table group.
- When brainstorming, give participants time to develop their ideas individually before being asked to share with their table group. This gives the less vocal people time to collect their thoughts and leads to higher quality, more creative results.
- Rotate the functional group roles of facilitator, recorder and spokesperson (see Roles and Rules) for each new task so that everyone at the table becomes active an assumes a role.
- In the large group sessions of the meeting, table groups report out and ask questions so that each group has a voice.
- Dot voting, a process in which the participants each have a few sticky, coloured dots to place on wall charts next to items they believe are most important, also individuates people.
- Leaders and experts should interact informally with the group during large and small group sessions to minimize social distance and create a sense of community rather than bureaucracy. Avoid sideline or private conversations while the group works. “We’re all in this together.”
- When table seating is impossible, create informal buzz groups, dyads or triads (groups of 2 or 3) as a way for people to speak and be heard.
- There are skilled facilitators within the MOHLTC system-call on them for advice and assistance.

Tools and Techniques Used to Stimulate Participation and the Flow of Creative Ideas

Setting up a physical environment that is conducive to maximum participation is only one part of what makes an effective meeting. The following are some tools and techniques you can use to generate discussion and get people thinking creatively.

Brainstorming: This is simply a process of asking people for their ideas and then encouraging a rapid-fire flow of ideas, without discussion, questioning, or challenging. All ideas are initially taken as legitimate and written down on large newsprint pads for later use. Brainstorming is more productive if people are given time for individual thinking before being asked to share their ideas.

Presenter, Panel, or Debate: Having speakers who present some organized comments can be an effective way to generate ideas and subsequent participant discussion. After the presentation, table groups should be given an opportunity to talk about what they heard, react to it and raise questions for clarification.

Buzz Groups: Break the large group into small "buzz" groups to discuss, brainstorm, or devise alternative solutions, etc. A small group allows greater participation. Buzz groups should designate someone to report their conclusions back to full group once reassembled.

Role Playing: Although somewhat unnerving to some people, role playing can be very useful to help people understand different perspectives by placing them in roles different from the ones they usually occupy.

Nominal Group Process: An issue is identified, and everyone is given index cared to write down ideas for about five minutes. The leader then asks for ideas to be read aloud, one at a time, going around the room. All non-duplicated ideas are recorded and numbered on a large newsprint pad. Brief questions are then allowed (for clarification only). If priorities are wanted, each person is asked to record the numbers of their preferred items. Votes are tallied. Priorities can also be determined using "sticky dots."

Snow Cards (Affinity Diagrams): Participants write ideas (i.e., goals, priorities, solutions or whatever is called for at that stage of the planning process) on large post-its (or large index cards with masking tape), stick them on a large wall, and then move them around to create clusters of ideas that hang together. This is effective for getting people up and moving. The technique is also useful for ordering tasks to accomplish a goal. The group can keep rearranging the steps until they arrive at an agreed-upon sequence.

'Rite, Roam, and Read: People write ideas on sheets of newsprint and tape them to the wall. Everyone then roams around and reads everyone's ideas. The group leader can then begin a discussion by asking for comments such as common themes or contrasting goals.

Roles and Rules for Group Participation

Distribute the list below to each table group so that they can identify and clarify their roles and the guidelines for group interaction. This will enable the table groups to manage their own individual discussions.

Facilitator

- Help focus the group on the task.
- Watch the time to be sure the group completes the task.
- Encourage everyone to participate.
- Remind people to listen while others are talking.
- Encourage people to respect and use their different perspectives and views.

Recorder
- Listen for key words, avoid editing, and use exact words.
- Capture the basic ideas, the essence.
- Write rapidly.
- Write legibly when using a flipboard chart (1-2” high).
- Number each sheet by reference topic, and group.

Spokesperson
- Be sure you understand what you are expected to report.
- Listen carefully to the discussion.
- Report key points as requested at the end of the session.

Rules for Brainstorming
- Do not discuss ideas.
- Do not judge ideas (i.e., good or bad).
- Building on someone else’s idea is fine.
- The more ideas the better.
- Encourage creativity.

MEETING MANAGEMENT

Meeting Checklists

There is a lot to think about when planning and conducting a meeting. Using the following checklists will ensure that you have all the elements of a successful meeting. In addition to the checklists, Section Six "Meeting Toolbox" contains forms for agenda minutes and evaluation.

Before the Meeting

- ☐ Are the objectives of the meeting clearly defined?
- ☐ Did members participate in developing the agenda?
- ☐ Send the agenda and any background information to all Steering Committee members before the meeting.
- ☐ Distribute background information ahead of time to invite resource people to come to the meeting.
- ☐ Schedule regular (at least quarterly) checks on the implementation of your area action plan.
- ☐ Does the agenda allocate time for evaluating past meetings and planning future meetings?
- ☐ Does the agenda designate who is responsible for different items?
- ☐ Does the agenda allow sufficient time to do a quality job on the agenda items?
- ☐ Have you determined logistics requirements: appropriate meeting space, audio-visual support, food, parking, other facility needed?

During the Meeting

- ☐ Start on time.
- ☐ State the purpose of the meeting clearly on the agenda.
- ☐ Designate someone to keep meeting notes.
- ☐ Note whether participants come to the meeting prepared.
- ☐ Keep information items brief and relevant.
- ☐ Follow-up on action items from previous meetings.
- ☐ Stick to the agenda and subject.
- ☐ Watch the pace. Keep it moving.
- ☐ Rotate leadership and facilitation roles.
- ☐ Limit or avoid side conversations and distractions.
- ☐ Use visual aids as much as possible.
- ☐ State ideas positively and show their relation to the overall issue.
- ☐ Get everyone to contribute.
- ☐ Obtain points of view by questioning or restating as you go along.
- ☐ Make frequent summaries during the discussion.
- ☐ Emphasize cooperation over conflict.
- ☐ Assign tasks and delegate responsibility as the meeting proceeds. See that they are recorded in the minutes.
- ☐ Clarify action to be taken at the conclusion of each agenda item.

- Guide the meeting from problem to solution.
- Wrap up the meeting:
    1. Summarize the decisions reached.
    2. Point out differences not yet resolved.
    3. Outline future actions, next steps to be taken.
    4. Set deadlines and review task assignments.
    5. Set the next meeting date, time and place.
- Before adjourning, take time to evaluate the meeting.
- Did the meeting begin and end on time?

Meeting Evaluation

To improve the quality of your meetings (and ultimately the effectiveness of your region's work), it is a good idea to do an evaluation at the conclusion of your meeting. An evaluation is simply a way to get people to say how well they think the meeting was conducted. In other words, were the tasks you set out to accomplish finished in an orderly and productive manner? When you ask people to evaluate a meeting, listen to what they say and incorporate their ideas in future meetings.

There are two simple ways to evaluate a meeting:

> *Oral Evaluation*: Go around the room and ask everyone to comment.
>
> *Written Questionnaire*: Prepare a simple questionnaire that you pass out at the conclusion of the meeting. Have everyone complete the form. Evaluation form templates are Included in the next section for use in Tobacco Control Area Network and Area Network Steering Committee meetings. These questionnaires integrate with indicators described in the coordinating Public Health Unit workplan.

After the Meeting

- See that main points from the meeting notes are distributed to participants with the agenda for the next meeting.
- Have you completed any actions you agreed to?
- Review evaluation data so you can incorporate constructive feedback into the next meeting.