How Do You Facilitate a Large Group Effectively?

The Problem:

Maybe you've been asked to lead a session with 20, 30, 40 attendees and though…yikes!!! Facilitating a large group certainly poses its unique challenges. This is certainly not the time to "wing it" ☺ With careful preparation and planning, large groups can be facilitated quite effectively.

Consider these suggestions….

- Define and document the specific purpose of the session. If the intention is primarily one way communication, that's much easier. Large companies have "all employee" conference calls to update everyone on news and events, but these type sessions are not intended to be interactive in nature. Instead, the purpose is primarily to present (or "push") information and field questions towards the end. In this scenario, the preparation focus is on ensuring the content is well developed and appropriate and the technology easily supports Q&A at the end.
- If it's a large group session where significant interaction is not expected, ask everyone to mute themselves (to minimize background noise) or utilize technology that allows you to mute attendees.
- At the beginning of the session review your **P**urpose, **A**genda, and **L**imit (a.k.a. PAL) and get each person to provide a physical indication (e.g. thumbs up, head nod, etc.) that they are in agreement with it. It's absolutely imperative that the facilitator confirm that everyone is "on board" before launching into the session. If you've got even a few people silently questioning (or even disagreeing with) the PAL, it can (and likely will) result in speed bumps later in the session. It's much better to expose these questions/concerns and deal with them early. Remember that you PAL is your plan, but it can be changed if needed. Don't be so married to your plan that you're not flexible enough to make necessary adjustments as needed to ensure the session is successful.
- Ensure the room configuration enables all attendees to see and hear one another. Preferred seating arrangements would be U shape or rectangular.
- Avoid going around the table to get input one by one. This wastes the time of those at the end of the line and invites multitasking. After all, if Jim knows that 8 other people will be commenting before you get to him, do you really blame him for checking his PDA while he waits?
- Introduce process elements (e.g. agenda, parking lot, action item list, ground rules, etc.) early in the session. With larger groups, structure becomes more of a necessity than a luxury.
- Utilize subgroups if possible. This can be a great time saver! Have subgroups work on a particular issue (or different issues), and ask them to select their top 3 ideas to share with the larger group.
- Be realistic about timings on your agenda and don't be afraid to make changes to the "normal" process. For example, if you're planning to do "Introductions", don't succumb to the temptation to list that as "5 minutes". If there are 25 attendees and each person takes just **one** minute to introduce themselves, that's 25 minutes…yikes! Instead, you may want to nix the standard introductions altogether and print name tents with each person's name, title (and first paid job – I like to throw in a personal item gathered before the session to get people making connections right away) OR consider having casual introductions over coffee 15 minutes before the start time .

If you have other tips on this challenge, please email us at tips@meetinggenie.com!

Next Month's Meeting Challenge:

"How Can I Stimulate More Creative Thinking in the Group?"