

## How Do You Manage Rambling Discussion and Keep the Group Focused?

### *The Problem:*

Does your group ever find itself engaged in a deep conversation on the viability of one vendor over another when you're *supposed* to be prioritizing a list of requirements that have to be finalized within the next two hours? Worse yet, sometimes, groups allow themselves to become sidetracked by the latest office gossip, personal discussions, or *anything* other than what they're supposed to be covering on the agenda. Too often, the meeting leader anxiously sits on the sidelines hoping (even praying) that somehow the conversation will come back around to the topic at hand. That kind of "staying on the sidelines" facilitation style may seem safe and respectful of the ramblers in the group, but it's not benefiting the team. Indeed, the facilitator must "get in the game"! Let's explore how...

### *Try these techniques....*

- Have a printed agenda (on a flip chart or whiteboard) in the room. When conversation strays off topic, stand up and point to the specific agenda topic to refocus the group.
- Include timings for each section of the agenda so you can more easily focus the group on the time allotted for each discussion point. Possibly ask someone on the team to provide a 5 minute warning before the scheduled end time for each section of the agenda.
- Simply, raise your hand and interrupt discussion to ask if the conversation is on topic and helping the group reach their goal for the meeting. *"Guys, allow me to step in for a moment to ask whether the vendor discussion is relevant for this particular section of the agenda?"*
- Introduce the Parking Lot at the beginning of the meeting and announce that you'll interrupt discussion to place any off topic discussion points on the parking lot to help keep the group on track. *"Jill, I realize that you feel strongly about the inventory control issue, but I'm wondering if we should try to resolve that now or could we possibly place it on the parking lot?"* (Review all parking lot items at the close of the meeting and assign action items for each.)
- Assign someone on the team to act as the "rambler police" (use a badge if appropriate). This person is responsible for raising their hand anytime the discussion veers off topic.
- Consider using the ELMO technique. ELMO = "Everybody, Let's Move On!" Whenever anyone in the group feels the group is rambling too much, they're expected to pick up the ELMO doll (in the center of the table).

If you have other tips on this challenge, please email us at [tips@meetinggenie.com](mailto:tips@meetinggenie.com)!

### **Next Month's Meeting Challenge:**

*"How do you help the group reach consensus when they simply don't agree?"*