Book Review: Effective Group Facilitation in Education: How to Energize Meetings and Manage Difficult Groups by John F. Eller (2004)

Amanda Melcher, University of Montevallo

Meetings are an essential and unavoidable part of academia, but bad meetings do not have to be! We've all been there...the committee chair that can't stay on task, the guy that never stops talking, or the group in the back that's resistant to ANY change. Why do these bad meetings occur? A few of the most common reasons include inexperience and lack of preparation on the part of the facilitator, communication breakdowns within the group, and lack of support from members. Then there is the other (wonderful) extreme, the efficient, productive meeting. However, more likely to occur is something in between: a meeting that went "OK" but could have gone better for everyone with a few adjustments by the group leader. But what might some of those adjustments be? How can someone lead an effective meeting so attendees won't dread it the next time it's on the calendar.

In his book, *Effective Group Facilitation in Education: How to Energize Meetings and Manage Difficult Groups*, John F. Eller provides insights on successfully leading a meeting. While it includes some theory to support an understanding of successful group facilitation, the book's true purpose is to serve as a practical handbook including tips, best practice examples, and tactics to manage difficult situations. Eller, a professor who teaches doctoral courses in Educational Administration & Leadership at St. Cloud State University, seeks to close the gap that is sometimes present between theory and practice, thereby producing a complete guide to group facilitation within an educational setting. The book is laid out chronologically, from the planning phase to completion, and is organized into three sections: the foundations of effective group facilitation; the actual facilitation process; and finally, dealing with issues that arise that have the potential to derail a meeting.

The first chapter is aptly entitled "What am I getting into?" Eller stresses the importance of understanding the various aspects of facilitation, including its advantages and hardships. Why use groups for decision making—wouldn't it be easier and much faster for individuals to make decisions? Eller points out some of the most compelling reasons: it increases group creativity, it provides more perspective, it keeps stakeholders involved in the decision process, and it divides the workload. Not all decisions lend themselves to group work and it is essential to make the distinction. Most importantly, the group should have a clear purpose, the group's decisions should be respected, and there should be a system in place to implement the recommendations of the group. He uses vignettes and real-life examples to illustrate his themes and provides a series of templates in the first chapter which are designed to assist a facilitator in identifying personal strengths, articulating personal mission, and

identifying areas that need growth. Eller excels in his use of templates and exercises, which provide a starting place for a new facilitator.

Groups tend to fall into the same predictable pitfalls; facilitators must anticipate these roadblocks to productivity and prepare interventions to keep the meeting moving forward. One valuable tool that can be used to avoid group stalemates is a thoughtfully-devised agenda; it is necessary for the structure, focus, and success of a meeting. Another important function of the agenda is the ability to break a lengthy meeting down into digestible parts, with either specific or nonspecific allotted times for each item. This also allows the facilitator to keep the meeting on task. It also helps to distribute the agenda in advance; experience has shown me this provides attendees time to prepare and not fire off the cuff.

The third chapter addresses how to successfully start a meeting. While the latter part of this chapter contains some great strategies for beginning a meeting on the right track, Eller loses me with his early suggestion of selecting music to set the tone of the meeting. This could be construed as cliché corporate shenanigans; I can imagine my colleagues scoffing. Luckily, he moves on to what I consider to be a very helpful endeavor, particularly for groups that might not know each other very well, foundation-setting activities. While no one wants to waste time, these don't; they are useful ways of making sure the meeting gets off on the right foot. For example, everyone in the group provides their name and something positive they experienced related to teaching; another option for groups is a "good news" starter in which all members share a good thing that recently happened to them. Essentially, it is a way to break the tension, get to know one another better, and begin the meeting positively. Framing is another effective tool in group facilitation; it sets a verbal boundary around the meeting (e.g., what topics **won't** be discussed during the meeting) and outlines the goals. It brings control back to the facilitator if the group has a habit of getting off track.

Eller moves on to strategies for working successfully as a group. A primary reason group work exists is to bring out diverse perspectives and solutions to a problem. He asserts that teams must be interdependent and returns to one aspect of facilitation repeatedly: the emotional and perceptive skills needed to be a successful facilitator. For instance, he states that group members must have their psychological needs addressed: they need to feel safe, comfortable, and welcome. Members need to feel like they belong to the group, respect other member's talents and ideas, and engage in dia-

log rather than debates. This chapter has several team build-ing exercise examples; they are a good idea if the team is not on a strict time limit or perhaps during an annual retreat, but could be construed as a time-waster for a very busy group, so use wisely. With or without team building exer-cise, conflict will inevitably occur and an effective facilita-tor can recognize the difference in productive conflict which helps define issues and bring about creative solutions, and unproductive conflict that centers on personal issues. When the latter form of conflict is present, the facilitator must not take sides, but exhibit empathy and take action to prevent a derailing of the meeting. Eller provides some useful notes on how to make sure conflict is productive (for example, to make sure alternative ideas are expressed) and does not keep building unchecked (for example, steps to help mediate dis-putes).

In the next two chapters, Eller addresses ways for the group to reach peak performance. One key function of a facilitator is to assess the energy level; low energy levels can cause group members to lose momentum and be bored. Although reason would suggest that very high energy levels would maximize decision making, too much energy can cause members to move too quickly through a problem. To increase energy, Eller suggests breaking a large group into small units to talk out a problem; alternatively, having mem-bers write responses can decrease energy. Brainstorming increases energy levels, but goals and time spent should be structured; criticism is discouraged until all ideas have been generated. Group members need a shared vision, which en-ables the group to see the final product, own the goal, and assess the outcome.

Eller wraps things up by addressing the more negative aspects that may happen during group work. He points out that a facilitator must practice self-care; facilitation can put a strain on an individual. A crucial task is to separate the emo-tions of the group from those of the facilitator. Avoid letting high negative or positive emotions deter from the task at hand. A tip Eller mentions involves the delivery of controver-sial information: instead of delivering strictly verbally, go visual. Present information on a screen with the facilitator off to the side or on a handout, in both cases the group members are given something other than the facilitator to focus nega-tivity on.

Librarians have a plethora of opportunities to participate in and lead groups—campus-wide committees, professional library association committees, internal library work groups, etc. With creativity this text can be applied to meeting facili-tation in a multitude of environments. Each group will have specific needs and require different strategies and skills. *Ef-fective Group Facilitation in Education: How to Energize Meetings and Manage Difficult Groups* is a worthwhile read for all members of a group. An effective meeting creates a positive personal experience for the facilitator and a reward-ing experience for everyone involved.

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