



## When a Meeting Goes South, Know You Are in Good Company!

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I recently had an experience that was anything but pleasant. It is not uncommon to receive phone calls from board members who are in need of help. Help with board trainings; help with facilitating strategic planning sessions, help with bylaw amendments, and the occasional need for helping with internal conflict. All of which I am happy to assist with. So when I received a phone call from a board member requesting facilitation help, I gladly accepted the invitation to meet with her board. The reason for the meeting surrounded internal conflict and difficult conversations were foreseen to be needed.

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### Tip of the Month

#### Be Aware of Your Power

When interacting with others we often are not aware of how power differentials can impact our relationships. These power differentials aren't necessarily bad or doomed to end in negative outcomes. However, not being aware of your power and its impact on others can leave your interactions vulnerable to negative outcomes. This is especially true when the potential for conflict is high or you are already in a conflict situation.

In a nutshell, power is the ability (or right) to make something happen. We all have power of some sort and when engaging with others we need

to be sure and not abuse it. Contemplate the following types of power and the role they play in your interactions.

#### **Positional Power**

With this type of power you are granted the authority to control resources and to reward and punish others as a result of the position you are in. Most bosses have this type of power. This type of power is not exclusive to people who have been granted authority. Even individuals fairly low in the hierarchy can wield this type of power if they have the ability to cause someone to be punished or rewarded.

#### **Personal Power**

Individuals with this type of power are able to influence others through their charisma and leadership regardless of the authority they have been granted. They are able to attract and hold followers who are not only willing, but pleased to make things happen for them.

#### **Expert Power**

Expert power is voluntarily granted to individuals as a result of their expertise, knowledge, and skills. It is not enough for someone to claim that they are an expert, they must also have credibility or they will be unable to influence others. Once that credibility and trust is gained, it may not be questioned.



"Aren't you glad we had this meeting to resolve our conflict?"

I prepared for this facilitation as I had for every other facilitation I have conducted. I knew the purpose of the meeting. I was aware of the participants as well as the product that was desired as a result of the meeting. I reviewed the process with the sponsor and we agreed on the agenda for the session. The last preparation step was to prepare for probable issues that may arise. If I knew what I know now I

might have changed my approach - hindsight is 20/20 though, and every story makes for a great lesson.

The day came that I was to work with this board and their Executive Director. I arrived early to arrange the room and greet meeting participants when they arrived. Folks started to arrive and the meeting seemed like the typical type that required difficult conversations but one that would leave everyone satisfied. Again, just as I had done a hundred times, I introduced myself and proceeded to explain the ground rules and process for the day. Consensus was achieved as a group and we were ready to begin the meeting - or so I thought. The meeting started off with one party discussing her concerns and then the next party discussing hers and before I knew it, our meeting was over and an official mediation was needed.

Here are the details I didn't mention; the Executive Director (E.D.) was the second party to speak and this individual threw more concerns on the table than the board had foreseen or was prepared to discuss (blindsided, so to speak) and before the board and the E.D. could discuss the day's topics on the agenda, the E.D. was out the door leaving me and the board dumbfounded, for a lack of a better word.

Sitting there with a board who needed direction (and me wishing I had a body double so I could go run away); I decided that this meeting was officially over and that mediation should be discussed. I discussed this option with the board and they agreed that yes, mediation between the necessary parties was crucial to repairing the damage done.

I wish I had a happy ending about this story, however, after a lot of thought, I realized that some good did come of this meeting that went south. It made me, the facilitator, realize that as much as we try to prepare for every probable issue, issues still arise and the art to facilitating is to handle these situations when

they happen. One of the reasons I love facilitating is the ability to be unscripted and in the moment with a group of folks. Of course, I prefer the meeting sessions to end well and achieve the desired results. The other “ahh-haa” moment I had days after this session while I was preparing to teach a facilitation class was the importance for facilitators to stay calm and collected during difficult situations and it reaffirmed what we always tell folks about facilitations; facilitators can’t control people or what is said, we can only guide the process. Letting participants own the meeting and the decisions made (good or bad) is our mission and why we as organizations and boards rely on third party assistance. Conflict isn’t always a bad thing; sometimes conflict needs to happen so better things can arise.

If you want to learn something about yourself, try facilitating – I learn something new every time.

