

# How to Get the Most out of Collaborative Work Sessions

## Set clear parameters to get the most from the group

- You should always have two facilitators: a leader and a manager.
  - The leader is the one who guides everyone through the agenda and facilitates the discussion. The manager takes notes, manages the time, takes a pulse check of the group, and intervenes accordingly. These should be assigned roles and ideally should be folks who don't have a vested interest in the outcome.
  - Which is why many folks hire external facilitators. Many will hire a leader but fail to identify a manager. The manager could be someone internal if they need to manage costs as long as they can be impartial.
  - There should be rules. The leader is in charge of setting them and keeping them. What I (Anne) always start out with when leading is my role, which is to push, to point out inconsistencies, to make sure everyone feels heard, and to facilitate respectful conflict ultimately in driving towards the objectives. I even admit that they may not like me at the end and that is okay.
- Give homework.
  - This is critical because everyone in your group thinks and acts differently. We love the messiness of these sessions where you are debating and ideating live, throwing ideas out. To ensure your processors or introverts get heard, you need to assign the "thinking" homework upfront.
  - Which means you need to bake into the agenda time for ALL homework to be shared. Whether this is individually or curated by a leader. You may also want to provide other thought-starter questions to allow your processors time to get their thoughts organized there as well. This will help your live thinkers put together coherent thoughts and not just throw-up everything they are thinking which can be disruptive.
  - Many choose not to do this because they want spontaneity in creativity. But really, the spontaneity comes when good ideas resonate and people start building on them to make them better. Without any checks, people can start running their own agendas and your session can get hijacked quickly by a few bold personalities.
  - Homework gets people thinking and makes the session MUCH more productive vs. starting cold. It is impossible to have thoughtful, strategic discussion on the heels of whatever you were doing right before this without homework.
- Allow for respectful debate.
  - But don't allow it to go off the rails or monopolize the time. Respectful debate is good when it is revealing relevant perspectives through different lenses or POV'S. This is why you are having the session. But many leaders have a tendency to shut down debate because it is perceived as confrontational.
  - If the debate is indeed a respectful one that brings true insight, make sure both perspectives are heard and captured. But know you do not need to solve for it in the moment. Capture it as data. If necessary, put it as a "parking lot item" to come back to. Your meeting can be hijacked by people who just want to be right and will argue until they are.
  - If you feel the debate is getting out of hand, there are a few things you should do:
    - Interrupt with "Thanks to the both of you for bringing valuable perspective. We have captured it and now we are going to move on." Don't wait for them to be finished.
    - Call a break if people need to calm down.
    - Address it directly with the people that you appreciate their input but they need to continue the discussion outside the session.
- Never leave the final decision up to the group.
  - If you remember anything, remember this. Final decisions should not be made by a committee. They should be made by a select group of chosen individuals who are best to make the decisions. This is a big reason why these sessions can fall flat and never have any traction. The decision makers should be identified before the session and stated and hopefully represented within the session.
  - What can tend to happen is the group swirls beyond the point of diminishing returns causing fatigue. This either ends in no decision with nobody knowing whose decision it really is after the meeting is all said and done or some random decision just to move on. Neither usually bodes well for strong, actionable follow-ups.
  - To make sure you have diversity in thought, you will likely want folks from different levels and disciplines who may not have the right purview to make decisions.
  - The biggest culprit of this is power-dotting where people tend to vote for their own idea or stupid ideas we would never do but seem cool and we wish we could do them.
  - This means you need to set-up your objectives appropriately. Instead of "choose" or "lock-in" it would be "provide 2-3 viable options" or "define 2-3 paths". The objectives are definitive but they don't mandate decision making. Which is why you can also shut-down unproductive debate.

