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Chapter 7

Preparing Participants for Collaboration

In my work with large project teams or with product teams composed of multiple project teams, I have learned the importance of paying attention to the participants long before they walk in the door for a meeting. This chapter provides a set of guidelines and formulas to think about when preparing such teams for the large meetings that move their work forward. As you read this guidance, think about how you can take the formality here and massage it, relax it, in order to apply it to small team contexts. Pay attention to the intent of the practices as you then move to alter them for your specific team contexts.

What It Means

Getting a team off on the right collaborative foot for an event or meeting requires some preparation work on your part prior to the meeting. To help team members understand the collaborative intent of the work and to encourage their enthusiastic participation, you'll want to find out a few useful things about each person's involvement. Additionally, you'll want to arm each participant with any information that can usefully prepare them to actively participate. Finally, you'll want to address the logistics necessary to smoothly pave the way for the actual event. When you prepare team members in this fashion, you help them believe that they own the meeting before they ever arrive in the room.

You prepare participants for collaboration by:

- Interviewing the sponsor
- Determining the participants
- Surveying the participants
- Setting the list of attendees
- Setting the expectations

Interviewing the Sponsor

In workshops, design meetings, retrospectives, or planning meetings, you may be the project manager who is calling the meeting with a specific end in mind (for example, “We need a design decision,” “We need commitment from the executive leadership,” or “We have to declare a go/no go on deployment of the latest build.”). In another scenario, as project manager, you may have been asked by the customer or stakeholders to hold a planning meeting to kick off the project. Or, because the project manager has subject matter expertise that requires her to actively participate in the meeting, you may have been asked to help the team by facilitating the meeting.

In any of these scenarios, your first order of business is to clearly identify, “Who is the sponsor of this meeting, and how can I ensure that this person gets what they need from this meeting?” The sponsor is the person (or the group of people) who has the most to gain or lose as a result of the meeting’s outcomes. In a sense, they are the party that needs the collaboration to take place and to succeed: They need some piece of information, or a strategy, or a decision, or a commitment from the participants.

For preliminary planning meetings, such as a Release Planning meeting, this is an executive or senior person representing the client group in the development project. They have secured the funding and the commitment from the business to proceed with the development effort. In addition, they’ve made predictions, assurances, or promises about the value the project can deliver. For the Release Planning meeting in an Extreme Programming project, the sponsor might be the customer who needs to learn how the team can define a high-level view of the next product release. In a retrospective, it might be the project manager who wants to learn more from the team about how to proceed with best practices in the future.

In collaborative, high-performing teams, the "sponsor" is very often the entire team; they have a specific need to have you very objectively manage the meeting agenda for them to ensure that they stay on track for their purpose. You merely own the process that gets them to their purpose through the means (agenda and practices) that can ensure their success.

To hold a successful collaboration, ask yourself or the sponsor:

What is the purpose of this meeting?

You can also reflect on these supporting questions to provide further insight into the meeting's goals:

- What do you want to accomplish through this meeting?
- What problems do you intend to address in this meeting?
- What benefits do you hope to reap?
- What organizational issues do you wish to address?
- What is the current situation of the group?
- What is the future state desired?

What Is the Purpose of This Meeting?

Of all the questions you might ask about a meeting, the most important is "What is the purpose of this meeting?"

Even for your own meetings (you are calling a planning meeting with your team, or you want to hold a project retrospective, or you need to hold a refactoring meeting), this big yet simple question prompts you to clearly define for yourself the sole and singular purpose of the meeting. It keeps you focused and honest.

To figure out the purpose of the meeting, pose the following scenario and question to the sponsor (or yourself):

> "Imagine that the meeting has just ended."
>
> "You are walking out the door of the meeting, and you turn to your colleague and say, 'I am so happy with what the group has accomplished in this meeting!'"
>
> "What was it that the group accomplished that made you so happy?"

When you are able to answer this question, then and only then do you have the true purpose of your meeting. But beware! You may discover even at this point that your meeting is in peril of failure. Here are a few indicators that your meeting's purpose may still be a bit too fuzzy to warrant gathering your team:

- You can't articulate the purpose in a single statement (yes, it is a design meeting, but you haven't yet formulated with the team how the design should be captured, what the scope of the design is to be, or what agreements are expected to emerge as a result of the design discussion).
- You have too many things you want to accomplish in one meeting and they don't really relate to one another.
- You don't know the purpose because the real reason you are having the meeting is because your director told you to have it.
- You hadn't really planned on an outcome; you just wanted to get together to talk with your team.
- You always have the meeting because it is your weekly meeting; that is its purpose.

So, how will you know when you are on the right track for defining your meeting? You'll know you have a clearly stated purpose when:

- It can be stated in the following way: "The purpose of the meeting is to …………" where you can fill in an *action* ("create," "define," "select," "produce") followed by an *outcome* ("process definition," "iteration scope," "Product Backlog," "set of use cases," "conceptual object model").
- It represents the outcome that would convince you (or whoever is the meeting's sponsor) that the meeting has been a success.

Determining the Participants

Once you have a clearly articulated purpose, you can now determine who the intended participants are. To guide a team in working collaboratively, help them value their time by being clear about a purpose and how each participant can contribute to that purpose. Begin by determining:

- **Who plans to attend—**Usually there is an initial set of attendees you or your sponsor has in mind.
- **Who needs to attend—**These lists don't necessarily coincide! You may learn that some named attendees have no clear reason for attending, while some key roles may be missing representation.
- **Why they are attending—**Just as you focus a meeting on a clear purpose, focus the list of attendees on why each is attending and how he or she is contributing.

In short, a successful collaborative team has all the right people in the room in order to make a sustainable, actionable set of decisions.

My Anecdote

I was involved in the planning of a very large Release Planning meeting and began by interviewing the executive sponsor about her purpose and objectives. So far, so good. I then started asking about the attendee list, explaining that I needed to be able to interview attendees about their needs with regard to the meeting. In talking with the executive sponsor, I started to learn that the attendee list was massive! Attendees seemed to fall into one of three categories: those people who had subject matter expertise and could drive decisions, those people whose managers had demanded that they be allowed to attend, and those people whom the executive sponsor felt she had to invite for fear of offending another group.

In these latter two groups, I could see that no one was empowered to make decisions; people were required to attend, and yet their attendance didn't ensure that they could make decisions. To get the sponsor's attention about this problem, I tried to delve into what each of their roles would be in the planning. This was unclear. I kept returning to the stated purpose of the meeting and its intended benefits. In this context, I urged her to reevaluate the role of each participant.

I worked with the meeting sponsor for a week to help her edit the list and make the purpose of attending the meeting very clear and very directed. Ultimately, we managed to reduce the attendee list by almost 50%.

Surveying Participants

With the purpose of the meeting defined, and a list of attendees outlined, you can now survey participants to prepare them for the collaboration. Without this step in your preparation, you run the risk of having unpleasant surprises in your meeting. Perhaps someone who has been invited does not want to attend because of a personal issue with the sponsor. Another person thought the meeting was for a completely different purpose. Yet another person believes that the purpose is completely wrong and needs to be altered. You survey participants to remove these surprises and meeting challenges before they happen.

To help participants learn about the meeting and their participation:

- **Gather their personal objectives—**When interviewing participants, state the purpose of the meeting and then ask the participant a question similar to the one you asked when articulating the purpose with the sponsor. This will help you learn what each participant's real reason for attending might be and how it aligns with or contradicts the stated purpose:

> "Imagine that the meeting has just ended."
>
> "You are walking out the door of the meeting, and you turn to your colleague and say, 'I am so happy I attended this meeting! I got exactly what I wanted out of it!'"
>
> "What was it that the meeting accomplished that made you so happy?"

- **Find out hidden agendas—**Look at the personal objectives and ask the participant further questions:
  - What do you believe your role to be in the meeting?
  - What do you think might get in the way of accomplishing the meeting purpose?
- **Learn what the ongoing battles are—**This is what my friend Janet Danforth calls "getting the canary to sing." As Janet talks about it, there is always some dirt lurking somewhere in a group that is setting out to go through some major collaborative event such as a strategy meeting or kickoff meeting. Someone will eventually "spill the beans" and let you in on what hasn't been working in the group. This is valuable information in your planning!

When you find out these potential disconnects prior to a meeting, you can plan the problems away in how you set up the agenda, seat the participants, and plan activities. Don't skip this step! Very quickly, you will learn:

- How much Forming still needs to occur in the group
- What sort of Storming is already going on
- What damage has been sustained as the group has been dealing with its divergence
- What activities may help the group move from just Norming into Performing
- How much to let go of very defined activities if the group is already Performing

Setting the List of Attendees—Participants and Observers

Having surveyed the full cadre of potential participants, you can now winnow or expand the list as appropriate for the meeting purpose.

Your interviews may have revealed one or more people who don't have a clearly defined role in the meeting. They may not even know why they have been asked to attend. Participants who attend a meeting but do not have a clear *raison d'être* in the meeting are distracting. As partially engaged attendees, they have the power to deplete your and the team's energy. They may have a hard time determining their useful role during the group's Forming stage. And as a group moves into its Storming phase, figuring out how to work together, these attendees without clear focus can create confusing and potentially destructive dynamics for others. In their meeting "identity crisis," they get uselessly caught up in the conflicts that can arise and may even create conflicts in order to have a role in the meeting, albeit a dysfunctional one.

These are the people you need to help understand that their contributions are best applied elsewhere.

Your interviews may have also revealed that some of the attendees plan to just "observe." A seasoned facilitator will tell you that there is no such thing as someone who just observes a meeting. Inevitably, the observer has an observation to share. If someone claims that they are just an observer in your meeting, provide them with this helpful set of guidelines:

- You may not speak to participants during the meeting.
- You may not speak to other observers during the meeting.

- You may not enter and exit the meeting at will.
- You may not work on your own work during the meeting; this includes your laptop, your iPaq, your PDA, your Blackberry, your daytimer, or your cellphone.

If you still have observers undaunted by these guidelines, check in a bit further with their intentions with the meeting:

- **Find out why they think they need to observe—**This may take asking, "The Five Whys," but do it. Their answer can give you information about the politics or the power of the group.
- **Find out if their presence can be detrimental to the team's collaboration—**Observers often tend to be from management or stakeholder roles. If they are not directly providing expertise and are not directly taking responsibility in the meeting, their presence may only serve to squash the trust of the team about their work.

In most of these cases, you should be able to ascertain the true role of the attendee. Invite them to attend in a participatory fashion or, with approval from the team, welcome them as an observer and remind them of the ground rules that will guide their "good observer citizen" behavior.

Setting the Expectations

You've set the purpose, interviewed the participants, and finalized the list of attendees. You now have one more crucial task in preparing participants for the meeting. You need to help them understand what will be expected of them and what can they expect in terms of their ownership of the meeting decisions and actions.

Their Preparation for the Meeting

A meeting may not be able to meet its purpose without the participants having completed some homework prior to the start of the meeting. You can learn about exactly what that pre-work should be based on your interviews with the sponsor and the various participants. As you survey these people about their roles and personal objectives, pay attention to assumptions they may have about what has taken place prior to the meeting. Learn what the participants are expected to know. This may lead to homework concerning:

- **Reading to do—**Shorten your meetings and keep them focused by having attendees complete any lengthy reading prior to the meeting. Don't allow meetings to be used for reading and reviewing detailed documents; extensive reading kills focus and momentum. Require reading *a priori* and use the meeting for making participatory decisions about the material.
- **Materials to bring—**If the group is expected to make strategic decisions about the upcoming release of a product, be sure that someone has data about what has been defined so far, what has been completed to date, what the effort was concerning that work, and what the known risks and issues are related to the work ahead.
- **Questionnaires to complete—**Some meetings need feedback from the participants even before they arrive at the meeting; make sure participants know this, complete it, and provide it.
- **Presentation materials to prepare—**For individual contributors, such as subject matter experts, who need to present group-wide, high-level material, encourage the use of brief, focused presentations. Support the presentation with materials (handouts, wall charts, posted files) that can be used for reference guidance in subsequent decision processes. If the material is not expected to be used as a guide later in the meeting, question its applicability to the purpose of the meeting.

Their Role in the Meeting

The meeting purpose isn't the only thing that shapes an attendee's participation. Prior to the meeting, help participants learn the work of their meeting role by addressing:

- **The subject matter expertise—**Each participant should be very clear about the expertise he brings to a meeting. This means arriving equipped with information in his area of expertise that can guide the team as it converges on team decisions.
- **The time commitment—**A well-run, highly collaborative meeting relies on full participation by all attendees. Make sure all participants understand the time commitment they face, especially for very large strategy meetings, Release Planning

meetings, or retrospectives. Discourage "in/out" behavior. When attendees are coming in and out of a meeting, this does more than just distract the other participants; it makes a statement that the transient participants find the meeting less important than other work they are doing. (For participants who have to time slice their involvement, bring the question to the other meeting participants about the impact on the meeting's purpose. Team members should then decide how the meeting should proceed.)

- **The "machinery" of a collaborative meeting—**When teams rely on collaboration for decision making, they are expected to engage fully in all information gathering, processing, and consensus checks. This requires participants to stay focused throughout the meeting and to believe in the power of the team to make the best decisions. And this requires that you ensure that they are well schooled in tools and processes for consensus building and consensus checking.
- **The scope of their authority—**In some collaborative meetings, teams may be making the final set of decisions that drive the next actions in a project. However, some meetings are meant to have a team create a recommendation to another individual or another team. In these situations, you should help set expectations prior to the meeting about the team's scope of authority. Will the team own the decision? Are they just being consultative? Will they be asked to facilitate others in making the decision?

The Potential Consequences

When looking at a meeting purpose and the roles of the attendees, find out whether the meeting may bring up potentially negative consequences to someone in the meeting. Knowing this information in advance can help you manage the discomfort or dysfunctions that may arise due to difficult revelations or decisions that come to light:

- Is the team in a go/no go for the next phase of the project?
- Are resources being reallocated due to missed deadlines?
- Is there discord among the business owners that could cancel the project?
- Are there concerns about the role of the architect?
- Has the QA team been targeted for outsourcing?

When you discover these consequences, determine how they may come out in the meeting and who specifically may be impacted. Develop an agenda that clearly manages the flow of information toward these decisions. Apply a more engaged facilitative role, as in a Forming mode. Ensure that the right attendees are engaged in the meeting to deal with the decisions and the actions that these decisions bring about.