



## Tip Sheet 6

### Answers to Your Questions

#### Engagement and Follow-Through

1. **How do you get people to commit to doing a project and then follow through? It's always hard because there seems to be a lot of excitement and momentum to work on projects at the in person meetings, but the follow through is sometimes hard.**

**Eli Mina:** I suggest you have a conversation with your group about the need to make the committee's work meaningful and productive. You can acknowledge that people have other commitments once they leave the meeting, but ask them to keep up their enthusiasm and make their follow-up duties a priority. I also suggest you establish a routine whereby you contact people by e-mail or phone midway between meetings, to check how they are doing and whether they can be counted on to complete their assigned duties on time.

Here is a script to start the conversation: *"Can I make an observation? It seems like we get very enthusiastic during in person meetings, but somehow that enthusiasm fades away once we go back to our cities. I think we need to make our work more meaningful and get more things done between meetings. Am I making sense? Do you have any ideas on how to achieve this?"*

2. **How do you motivate all of your committee members to volunteer for and participate in the committee's work?**

**Eli Mina:** It is certainly essential to keep volunteers motivated, so they will contribute to the committee's work and make it more effective. However, you need to have something to motivate them with. Consider these suggestions:

- Involve them in reviewing the committee mandate and in establishing the work plan to achieve it. This will increase the members' sense of ownership and commitment.
- If possible, develop a work plan (with their involvement) that can be divided among the members and get them involved in specific and meaningful tasks between meetings.
- Don't just take no for an answer. If everyone said "Sorry, I'm just too busy," nothing will get done or the hard workers will burn out. Press members to assist with any task, small or big.
- Stay in touch between meetings, check with members whether things are being completed, and ask if they need any help.
- Compliment members on their efforts and reward them with rounds of applause and token prizes (chocolates, cards, etc.).

3. **I experience frustration, post-meeting when few people do what it is they say they would.**

**Eli Mina:** See answer to Question 2.

4. **How do you get everyone to participate and ultimately avoid talking too much yourself?**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheet 3.

5. **My main concern has been with committee members not attending the virtual or in-person meetings. We are very productive with the group that is present.**

**Eli Mina:** The fact that those who do show up are very productive does not mean you don't have a serious problem to address. Having only a few people involved with the work of the committee means that some of you are doing too much work and could burn out.

To prevent this low commitment level, you should have had a conversation with all members at the start of the committee's work. In that discussion you would have emphasized the importance of acting as responsible and active partners in advancing the committee's work.

What to do now? Talk to those who miss virtual or in-person meetings. Let them know that they (and their knowledge and wisdom) are missed. Find out why they do not attend and whether something can be done to make the committee's work more compelling for them. Then check whether they intend to serve as active partners in the future. Don't accept tentative answers. If someone cannot pull his or her weight, he or she becomes "dead weight," making it difficult to get a quorum and potentially paralyzing the committee. Everyone should recognize that a committee is not a social club or just an opportunity to put something on a resume.

### Taking Action

1. **There are those projects that never seem to die but drag on and on. How do you get things moving or just get them off the table?**

**Eli Mina:** You need to sit down with your group and prioritize your work. Each project should be evaluated, with a formal decision on its status. Think about four options: Deal with the project, delay it, delegate it, or DROP it. If your group chooses the latter and someone still pursues it later, remind them that the group formally decided to drop it. Suggest that it's time to move on to other issues (assuming, of course, you indeed have other enticing and compelling issues on your work plan to deal with).

### Managing Discussions

1. **Please share strategies for eliciting input from all committee members during meetings (in order to avoid having one person or two people dominate the discussion).**

**Eli Mina:** Domination by a few assertive members ("the talkers") is a serious problem. It means that silent members ("the thinkers") are left behind (together with their wisdom and ideas) and may very well tune out of the discussion. Domination limits and constrains discussions, and can lead to flawed and one sided decisions.

To address this problem, try one or more of the following ideas:

- Give quiet members assignments and schedule them to report on progress and possibly lead discussions during a meeting.

- Have a discussion with your group about the need to make room for everyone to speak and contribute their insights and ideas. Ask "the talkers" to make room for "the thinkers" to speak during meetings. Ask for their input on how to structure broader participation.
- If a discussion is dominated by the talkers, try this: "Thank you Rudy and Rhonda. We need to hear from those who have not spoken. How about you David?" Don't wait for David to raise his hand, as he is a partner in decision making and should be treated as such.

2. **As a leader/chair my biggest stumbling block is dealing with people who want to vent/complain/wander off topic. Striking the right balance between giving everyone their say and moving things forward often feels like a tightrope act.**

**Eli Mina:** You are absolutely right: It is tough to strike the balance between inclusiveness on one hand and efficiency and effectiveness on the other. Being overly accommodating frustrates other members and slows down progress, so you do need to intervene.

Try this opening statement: *"I'd like to try something different at this meeting. In the past I was very concerned about being nice and accommodating and let people speak as long as they wanted. Several of you gave me feedback that this slowed us down and was frustrating. At this meeting, I will still make room for you to speak, but I will also work to keep us focused on the agenda. Please help me by keeping your comments brief and focused on the topic at hand. If you complain about something, I challenge you to also propose a way of dealing with it, if possible. Is that something that you can help me with? Thank you."*

Having made the above statement, if someone still digresses, complains or rambles, remind them of what you talked about at the start: *"Tom, we need to get back on track."* Or: *"Chuck, I hear you. Do you have a suggestion on how we might solve this problem?"*

3. **If views or opinions seem to be opposed, how can the chair move the meeting forward?**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheets 3 and 4 for useful strategies.

4. **How do you bring closure to a discussion that goes on and on?**

**Eli Mina:** You can try one of these scripts: *"Members, our time is limited. Does anyone have anything new to add, and – if not – shall we move on?"*

*"We have five more issues to deal with in the next hour and a half. This is an important discussion, but I suggest we bring it to an end in about 5 minutes, then take a short break, and then start with the next agenda item. Is that acceptable? Thank you."* (The promise of a break can do miracles for a group)

5. **How do you prevent people from rambling on and on during the discussion?**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheet 3.

6. **How do you keep the discussion on topic without stifling spontaneity and creativity? I am frustrated when a group gets off topic. When should the chair bring the group back on topic and how best to do so?**

**Eli Mina:** Some digressions may be healthy as a mental break, to allow the group to socialize for a limited time while it "recharges its batteries" and gets ready for the next agenda item. After a few minutes, the Chair should intervene and bring the meeting back on track: *"OK, it's time to get back on topic."* If the Chair does not do it, don't hesitate to raise this point. It is likely that other people are frustrated as well, and they will thank you for speaking up.

See Tip Sheet 3 for sample scripts.

7. **One of the most difficult things I have encountered while running meetings is when someone makes a poor suggestion for a given situation and I don't know what to say or do. I have a really hard time dealing with this, and I usually end up saying "OK, thanks, we'll think about it" but there might be a better way to address this.**

**Eli Mina:** Your response seems neutral and acceptable. You should not see yourself as needing to judge or follow up on every suggestion. Just acknowledge it and see if the group wants to pick it up. If it has merit it will be picked up. Otherwise it won't.

If the individual does not let go and - instead - persists with the bad idea, don't hesitate to say: *"Jack, I usually don't like to comment on ideas that people come up with, but I do need to say something about the one you're suggesting now. On the surface your idea sounds good. But there are some issues with it that you may not be aware of and they make the idea problematic. Here are a few of them: \_\_\_\_\_. I just thought to let you know."*

8. **How can we politely discourage laptop use during meetings? Sometimes they are useful, especially for meeting minutes, but often people are checking e-mail, etc.**

**Eli Mina:** Laptops can indeed become a distraction, in which case the individual is not listening and learning from the discussion, and is not positioned to share any concerns or observations. Members need to understand that they are partners in the process and need to act in a manner that reflects this status.

Try the following strategies:

- Add the following comments to printed meeting guidelines or to your opening remarks: "We have several important issues to discuss today, and it is important to have all of you focused on the discussion, so you can share any observations and concerns. I know some of you have cell phones, and I am asking you to put them on silent mode, or – preferably – to turn them off while we're in session. Some of you are using laptops, and I am asking that you not allow them to distract you to check your e-mails or anything else. If you find it easy to be distracted because the meeting may be slow or monotonous, please let me know and I'll call a break or try to pick up the pace. I gave you small red flags, so you can wave them at me if you're suffering. Does that make sense? Can I count on your support?"
- If you notice someone focusing on his or her laptop and you seriously doubt that he or she is focusing on the discussion, say: "Trina, we need you."

### Agendas: Managing People and Time

1. **My greatest frustration is the process of analyzing what the meeting needs to decide and/or accomplish before the meeting happens (this determines the agenda and the times allotted as well as the information and data presented). My second largest frustration is keeping the members (and myself) to operate within time constraints.**

**Eli Mina:** Analyzing what the meeting needs to accomplish is important, but it should be done before the meeting. In addition, the chair needs to understand that meeting dynamics are not a precise science. Let go of the need for perfection, complete certainty, tight control, and allow the meeting to unfold and generate the outcomes. If everything were to be decided in advance of the meeting, what's the point of having a meeting?

2. **What is the best way to balance getting through an agenda and accomplishing a task and the social meandering that also can make a meeting enjoyable?**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheet 3 on managing people and time in a meeting.

3. **Timing of the agenda is the hardest thing for me to handle. It seems as if sometimes the best discussion gets going and the moderator says we have only time for one more comment when maybe the rest of the agenda should be shelved to get the good discussion finished. Other than forcing the shorter informational items to the top so they will get covered, and let the longer items go over if that is an option, what are ways for a meeting planner to get the work done and people satisfied that the topic has really been covered?**

**Eli Mina:** Time management is important, but should not be the overriding goal. Ultimately you want to have good discussions and quality decisions, especially on substantive issues. Being rushed tends to compromise the latter goals. Here are a few suggestions:

- Don't over pack the agenda, and you'll be less likely to need to rush things.
- If you allot time to issues, be realistic and allow for some leeway, so you'll be less likely to need to cut off really positive discussions.
- If the time allotted to an issue expires and there is a need for more, the chair or a meeting participant can request that more time be allotted: *"Can we have ten more minutes for this item? We are having a really good discussion and it seems premature to stop it."* The group can then decide whether there has been enough discussion, possibly by a vote.
- Watch the clock and don't lose time to minutiae. Time is money, and you want to invest it wisely. Don't be afraid to say: *"Members, we need to move on. We don't want to rush the discussion on the topic of \_\_\_\_ later on."*
- I would not force informational items to the top or the bottom, but keep them in their logical place on the agenda. Your scheduling decisions should not be driven by fear. Just plan things and estimate realistically, then monitor progress and keep members informed. Encourage them to be brief and help you run an inclusive yet efficient and effective meeting.

4. **What are effective methods to keeping things on topic?**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheet 3.

5. **How does one bring closure to a presentation that drags on well past its designated ending time? This also happens to me regularly. I've tried to very explicitly indicate the time allotted to the presentation and have even explained the importance of ending on time. But I've still had presenters continue as if the meeting was all theirs.**

**Very frustrating. And I'm pretty sure at least some attendees sensed my frustration and were made to feel uncomfortable as a result.**

**Eli Mina:** To prevent this problem, I would negotiate the timing with the speaker in advance of the meeting and agree on how I will let them know that time is up. I would be quite firm, especially if the person has been prone to rambling in the past.

If, despite your preventive efforts, a person acts as stubbornly as you described, why not let him or her know that time is up and call a break immediately. The speaker will lose his or her audience and will realize that *"it is better to leave your audience before they leave you."*

6. **The things I think are critical for facilitation include: having an agenda that includes some thought about if what is being discussed is for Information only, Discussion Required etc. to give a frame of reference to the members there about what they'll be asked to listen to/do, as well as then thinking about how much time would be needed for each area. It's nice to allocate time for each topic to make sure that everything gets discussed. I've been in some meetings where that same agenda also includes an area for "Decisions made or Action Steps required" to let everyone know what the outcome of each topic was. Also vital is a note of follow-ups (and who's responsible and how and by when).**

**Eli Mina:** Thank you for your ideas. It sounds like they have worked well for you and your groups. Keep up the good work.

7. **How can the committee chair be better organized and keep the meeting momentum, confidence to steer a group, and an awareness of time.**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheets 2 and 3.

### Suffering is Optional: Taking Responsibility

1. **As a participant/committee member I'm often frustrated by meetings that simply repeat the same conversations over and over. Many meetings get sidetracked into dealing solely with bureaucratic mumbo jumbo or rehashing what happened last time around rather than moving things forward. I think the basics would help here: how to keep good minutes, communicate between meetings so everyone is on the same page, drafting clear and meaningful committee charges, etc.**



**Eli Mina:** You are right about the basics, so you seem to have answered your own question in your last sentence. I have a question for you: Why is it you've continued to suffer? Why have you not shared your frustrations and suggested solutions with your group?

Many meeting participants defer to the chair and expect this person to ensure that everything works: that the charge is clear, that meetings are well run, that repetition and wheel spinning are reduced, that progress is made, that decisions are clearly articulated and captured in the minutes, and that there is follow-up after the meeting. Unfortunately, reality is not quite that perfect, and – if you wait for the chair to lead – you might wait and suffer a long time.

Suffering through imperfect conditions (as you have done so far) is certainly an option. However, if you really care about the organization and want it to stop suffering (yes, you're not the only one suffering), try one or both of these two suggestions:

- Meet your chair privately before or after the meeting, share your observations, and make your great suggestions on how things could improve.
  - Find an opening to speak up at the meeting: *"Can I make an observation? I come to these meetings every six months, and – frankly – I don't know how different they are each time: We hear presentations on more or less the same topics. A lot of time and money are invested in these meetings, and we owe our members a good return on this substantial investment. Can we establish a small sub-group (and I'm prepared to be on it) to look at how we work together, help make us fresh and effective and get us to move forward?"*
- 2. How does one stop a group from going over and over the same discussion, especially if we had it at a previous conference and now are repeating the discussion at the next conference, for example?**

**Eli Mina:** See Tip Sheet 3.

- 3. What frustrates me most in meetings is when the chair doesn't know how to rein in someone or the chair herself (or himself) provides so much chatty type of information or wants to elaborate so much on something that others are wondering why they are there.**

**Eli Mina:** Review Podcast 3 and Tip Sheet 3 where I compare an effective chair to being an orchestra conductor,

"waving the baton," bringing out the best in each participant, and orchestrating the production of quality discussions and credible decisions. The weak or talkative chairs you describe do not match that description. They are not positioned to provide effective leadership to the meeting.

You can proceed in one of two ways:

- Speak to the chair privately during a break and share the content of Tip Sheet 3. If he or she is talkative, suggest that their role is not just to talk but also to make room for others to talk; not to make decisions but to facilitate shared decision making. If he or she is weak, suggest that they intervene to prevent domination and that they introduce balance to the meeting.
  - If the suffering is too much, speak up at the meeting (others will surely appreciate it): *"Excuse me, Janet, but our time is running short and I believe several of us want to speak on this topic." Or: "I think we need to hear from people who have not spoken. Can we establish a rule that first time speakers get priority over second time speakers? And can we please remind people to be brief and make room for other members to contribute?"*
- 4. The most frustrating meetings I attend are the ones where discussion drifts all over the place and the meeting leader does nothing to keep the discussion focused and relevant to the agenda. Then again, often those meetings have no agenda.**

**Eli Mina:** If there are digressions, speak up: *"Can we please get back on topic?"* The fact that you are not the chair does not make your input invalid. Chances are that other members will approach you after the meeting and thank you for alleviating the suffering.

If there is no agenda, share your observation with the group at the meeting or with the chair after the meeting, and request a higher standard. Your time is too important to be taken for granted in this manner.

You don't have to be harsh or angry when you speak up, as this could make the recipient of your feedback embarrassed or uptight. Remember that people don't show poor leadership because they are bad. Perhaps they see dysfunctional meetings all the time and are not aware of how frustrating their lack of leadership is for others. Your feedback will be helpful and educational to them, but you need to give it in a manner that makes it easy for others to receive it and learn from it.

- 5. How do you manage meetings that go on too long, or where the organizers aren't aware of their audience's needs, or where the issues could have been better addressed in one-on-one meetings or over coffee.**

**Eli Mina:** All the problems that you are raising are potentially damaging to the group. If people have been sitting for too long, the likelihood that they are listening and learning from the discussion is small: *"The human mind will absorb only as much as the human seat will endure."* If members' needs are not addressed, they will be frustrated. If an issue could have been resolved over coffee, everyone's time is wasted and people will resent it.

Suffering is optional. Speak up at the meeting or give the leader constructive feedback after the meeting.

- 6. I have experienced frustration sitting in meetings where irrelevant topics to my job are covered. This is often true in large meetings where a small group (2 or 3 people) are the only ones involved because it is something that they need to discuss. How can we encourage people to meet separately and not waste everyone's time?**

**Eli Mina:** Have a conversation with the chair between meetings and share your concerns and suggestions. For example: *"I have something to discuss with you about our meetings. Is now a good time for this? Thank you. My concern is that the agenda seems to be relevant to only a few people, but the rest of us have nothing to add to it or learn from it. I*

*am thinking that it might be better and less disruptive to only invite people to a meeting if the agenda has direct relevance to them. Does that make sense?"*

- 7. What frustrates me is having a meeting when it isn't necessary or dragging it on when it could conclude in ½ the time. I think there are certain tasks that can be accomplished outside of a committee (via e-mail, wikis, small groups) and the facilitator/chair should make sure to explore carefully why it's important to meet in person. What can only be accomplished with the group in a face-to-face environment?**

**Eli Mina:** Your concerns and suggestions are valid. You could do one of two things:

- Find an opening to share your observations with the group and propose specific improvements (you always come across better when you not only oppose and criticize, but also propose specific and attractive alternatives to the non-working status quo).
- Share your observations and suggestions with the facilitator in private.

Remember that suffering is optional, especially the collective suffering. If no one complains, a dysfunctional reality could become hard to shake off. You and your group deserve to have your time well used. In addition, the organization invests much time, money and efforts in meetings, and it deserves a good return on investment.