

Essay 2: A Diversity of Roles

An effective team allows members to practice various group process roles, where people find their role strengths while avoiding stereotypes. The best meetings allow balanced participation.

The worst meetings are those where the boss drones on about whatever is on his mind (my worst bosses were men—I’m prejudiced—you may have had other experiences). After the boss concludes, your colleagues are allowed to drone on. In all the droning, you notice that little new information has been presented. Projects were reported to be moving ahead bravely but were mysteriously behind schedule. Reports from previous meetings were given again. Everyone “gets on the same page,” but the page always seems to be the table of contents.

Much time of presidential cabinet meetings seems to be taken up with the passing of information among silos. How foolish! If cross-divisional teams were running systems, vice presidents (and I was one for too long) would be unnecessary. These teams must have effective meetings. A diversity of thinking is needed, as is a diversity of roles. Let’s look at the roles of a good team.

Chair. In the traditional meeting, the boss is the chair. He (again my prejudice) takes all the roles. He is the chair, the facilitator, the timekeeper, the listener, and the curmudgeon. Because of the weight of the roles, he does them all badly. He uses his boss/chair position to reinforce his authority and worldview. He is so busy “leading” that he doesn’t notice his troops are flagging, perhaps even considering rebellion, at least desertion.

Any member of a good team may chair a meeting. Teams should rotate roles with each meeting. A team should deemphasize hierarchy. Roles differentiate but do not rank. A pitcher may be a star, but a team without a first baseman loses.

A chair calls on people. A chair follows the agenda. A chair controls the tempo of a team meeting.

A chair does not validate or invalidate a contribution. The team is responsible for decisions. The chair does not ask frequent contributors to “chill,” or the silent to contribute. That’s the job of the facilitator. A chair does not halt discussion. That’s the job of the timekeeper.

A chair may call upon herself or himself and contribute. The chair is an equal. If the chair abuses this prerogative, the facilitator will politely request the chair for less enthusiasm.

A chair may ask someone to expand on a contribution. Only the facilitator, however, may interrupt someone.

You will note that this is a diminished role compared with traditional chairmanship. The chair need only announce the topic from the agenda and call on people to contribute. This is a purposeful limitation, intended to end previous abuses.

Facilitator. This is the most difficult role. A good facilitator listens to the *process* of the meeting. This level of listening often requires such single-minded concentration that the facilitator will be unable, if asked at a random point in a meeting, to say what the content of the discussion has been. A facilitator must constantly ask her or himself, “How can I help this group move ahead? What seems to be blocking progress?”

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A facilitator notices when people get off topic and decides whether the new topic needs to be discussed or put on a future agenda. This must be done quickly to prevent the loss of time in the current meeting.

A facilitator notices when people are talking past each other, usually because they are at differing levels of abstraction (see the coming essay on Levels of Knowledge). For example, the agenda calls for a discussion of principles and someone wants to present their design solution. The scribe should handle this, but the facilitator may be the first to realize the problem.

A facilitator must help people stay within their assigned roles. A facilitator must help people develop their thinking styles. Goading the divergent thinker to keep throwing out ideas when that part of the agenda calls for it is fair. Pushing the inductive thinker to create a theory from the data is also fair.

A facilitator should note who is not contributing and help the chair bring them into the discussion. The facilitator should also ask the frequent contributor to help others to contribute.

The facilitator should be scanning faces to see who is dissatisfied and to pause discussion and ask them if they wish to say something. Those who appear mirthful might be asked, if the discussion has gotten too tense, to help lower the tension.

A facilitator should never contribute. This is a difficult requirement but when you begin to formulate an idea, you lose track of the process of the meeting. If a facilitator finds an idea taking hold, the best course of action, if ending thought on the idea seems impossible, is to ask someone else to switch roles.

A facilitator must always be calm, quiet, and polite. A facilitator must appear to be solely focused on the progress of the meeting, on the process, and not on the people of the team. A facilitator must never appear judgmental.

The role is intense and only slowly learned. The auditor, a role discussed last, can do much to help a fresh facilitator understand how to improve the next time she or he takes the role.

Scribe. The best way to make progress at a meeting is to have someone stand in front and try writing down contributions on a large pad on an easel... make that two or three easels.

Because of the unfortunate prejudice of men to see women as only good secretaries, I recommend that no woman may be a scribe until after three men have held the role. Also, bad handwriting is no excuse. Just print and hope for the best.

The scribe is the pro listener. The scribe must hear a comment and put it into a short sentence that he can fit somehow on the pad. "Did I get that right?" Then the contributor must rethink her or his point and decide if what was contributed made enough sense for the scribe to have written it correctly.

The scribe can also sort out points that are off topic. If the group is working on a set of principles and someone throws out their usual solution, the scribe can jump over to another easel and write "Design" at the top, saying, "Why thank you Joe. I'll just put that dandy design idea right over here, so we don't forget it."

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There are technological ways of doing this without big pads. These are necessary when meetings are online. Still, I like the intense focus that a pad and a scribe give to a face-to-face meeting.

I was fortunate at one point to have an administrative assistant who attended meetings. Although she was not a full team member and did not scribe, she transcribed the notes from the large sheets to produce a more permanent record. She also read minds, which came in very handy. Having the transcribed pads available before the next meeting allowed greater progress for the team.

Taper. A taper is one who tapes, that is, the person who tapes each filled sheet to a window or wall. The scribe and meeting cannot pause. This is not an intellectually demanding job. The person who will be taper at the next meeting must make certain, however, that there are sufficient pads, easels, markers, and tape for that meeting.

Timekeeper. The penultimate item on any agenda is the setting of the next agenda. Each item on the agenda is given a time allotment. The timekeeper keeps the team aware of the limits and suggests changes to the limits as talk either drags or ends abruptly. The timekeeper also watches the energy level of the group and suggests short breaks when energy falters.

Ratifier/Listener. Many groups have an older, distinguished member who watches the proceedings, often silently. He (and the person is not necessarily of that gender but bear with me as I paint a somewhat fictional picture) appears to sit on a high mountain, peering down disdainfully. Slowly he raises his hand and says, “Madam chair, I believe we’ve talked around this a great deal, but what I’m hearing is agreement, although, perhaps, worded quite differently by Jerry, Sue, and Lil, on these three points...” This is the ratifier speaking.

In general, when the ratifier talks, people listen. American culture prizes making points, exhibiting intelligence, making grand speeches, but it does not prize listening much. The ratifier listens. The ratifier notices when the scribe is frustrated, trying to write a third point that sounds exactly like the previous two. The ratifier has sat in too many long-winded meetings.

Not all teams have such a member. The role should be explained and assigned on rotation. It turns out, a person can learn to listen.

Comedian. This role will not necessarily rotate. Sometimes a person’s best use is to make the group laugh, especially after a difficult discussion.

This is a good place to introduce the Least Valued Member Syndrome. The comedian may be the least valued member, someone who does not have much to contribute, and, perhaps, feels inferior to the others in the group. More commonly, however, there is a member who disagrees with the rest of the group on the necessary quality level of the intended product, wishing to put less effort into the task or much more effort.

Graduate students, forced to work together as a team for a year, would inevitably come to me as department chair to complain about one member. A year is a long time in the life of a graduate student. I would not allow them to fire the person. The team project would be graded, and every member of the team would receive the same grade. They had to solve that problem themselves. Nevertheless, I could usually defuse the situation by inviting the whole team into my office and by unwinding the most offensive set of conversations. “What was the last thing

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said on this?" "What did you hear when it was said?" "How did you feel when you heard it?" Then to the person who said it: "What do you think you said?" "What did you intend with those words?" "What did you hear that caused you to say those words?" As we unwind the conversations, people noticed that they heard and felt much more than was intended and that they misheard according to their own prejudices. The disagreement on quality would begin to be understood as just that, not an indictment of character or bad faith. There was a basis for disagreement and room for compromise. I helped them understand that there would always be a least valued member, no matter how many people they fired. The misunderstood person simply had more commitments than they were aware of and could not contribute at the level they thought "fair." They would expect less. He would do more. Even a comedian can be valued.

Curmudgeon. This is a valuable role when the team must make difficult decisions that will affect faculty. I learned this from fellow consultant, Pat Sanaghan. You bring a faculty curmudgeon onto the team. The curmudgeon will make life difficult, but he or she will explain what the faculty fear and will make the team take that into consideration. When you can bring the curmudgeon around to supporting your somewhat watered-down proposal, you will have an invaluable ally to move the project ahead.

Cultural anthropologist. Anyone can be a team cultural anthropologist. I view culture rather simply as the expectations we have of the proper behavior of others and ourselves. Our attitudes toward group responsibility, our attitudes toward authority figures, our need to appear independent, what we say when we walk into a room are not so much determined by individual choice as by cultural imperatives.

You may be the quietest and most polite student in the class, but when you go back to Japan you may be told that you are sticking out like a nail that needs to be hammered down. You've become American! You may be from Harlem, but if your teammates are from the Virgin Islands and you don't say "Good Morning" when you walk into the room, you are rude!

When a team member is not behaving as expected, the person taking the cultural anthropologist role must notice the discomfort and put the question on the table. The facilitator may be the first to notice and should be assisted by the culture "expert" to get people to talk about expectations of behavior.

In a later essay, I will discuss methods for increasing awareness of cultural differences.

Auditor. At the end of the meeting, the auditor must devise a method for the team to assess the process of the meeting. This is especially important for improving the quality of facilitation. Very few teams will have trained facilitators. The auditor's reflections and the help of others will go far in improving the quality of facilitation as the team matures. Did the group get hung up at some point? Why? What does the facilitator think would have been good to do in that situation?

Often, however, time has run out and one can only do "Una Palabra," one word. Each person thinks of a word that describes their feelings about the meeting. While this is often a "feel good" exercise, on occasion a person will say, "disappointed." The facilitator should later follow

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up with that person to understand what the group might have done better and how the facilitator might have helped.

The key to all this is rotation of roles. While learning the roles is useful, the most important outcome is a valuing of the person trying to fulfill a role. Rotating roles and trying on thinking styles allows team members to act within expectations and be valued as individuals.

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