

Facilitating Effective Meetings and Communication Skills

Objectives:

1. Participants will acquire skills on how to have an effective meeting.
2. Participants will learn meeting facilitation skills.
3. Participants will better understand the elements of communicating effectively.
4. Participants will learn to improve their listening skills to better improve communication in meetings.
5. Participants will learn key skills in building an effective team.

Activities:

1. Identify the characteristics and key factors that participants feel make a good team. What are the characteristics of a good leader? Of a bad leader? How are these different?
2. How can you foster these factors within your team?

Discussion:

1. Discuss with participants what makes a meeting effective. Have them recall a meeting that was non-productive and how they felt leaving the meeting (angry, time wasted, frustrated, etc.). What could have made the meeting more effective? Who should take responsibility for making the CPT meeting more productive?
2. Discuss the difference between listening and just hearing. What makes you feel like you are being listened to?

Facilitating Effective Meetings

Many people dread meetings for being time consuming, pointless and boring. A good facilitator can turn a bad meeting into a productive work session with little effort. When the responsibility of running a CPT meeting falls into your hands, here are a few tips that will help the process:

1. **Create an agenda and stick to it.** Going into the CPT meeting with what you want to discuss and accomplish will increase the chance that the meeting will be well attended and productive. Without an agenda people will bring up related items that aren't critical to achieving the meeting goals. Many times these items are not relevant to all meeting members. If this happens frequently, people will stop coming to the CPT meeting knowing that nothing will be accomplished.
2. **Watch the clock.** A good facilitator will keep to the agenda and the time allotted. CPT meetings that run over schedule with little accomplished will frustrate members. If items run over the allotted time, the facilitator may decide that much more discussion is needed and put them on the agenda again for the next meeting.
3. **Turn ideas and decisions into action.** CPT meetings can sometimes be so vague that participants don't know what they are supposed to do next. Bad meetings can cause two people to do the same task while others sit idle not knowing what to do. Good facilitators should get an agreement on every decision, help the group to develop an action plan and assign a person responsible for the action. Meeting minutes will reflect this process and responsibility.
4. **Have fun, but don't mismatch activities and people.** CPT meetings are work, but that doesn't mean that participants can't have fun. Allow joking and small chit-chat if that makes the meeting more productive, but know when to cut the chatter when it takes over the group and focus is lost. Make the CPT meeting environment one where participants feel comfortable, both physically and emotionally. If participants feel secure, they will be more likely to offer ideas, join in the discussion, and offer assistance.
5. **Speak plain English.** Decisions can't be made when participants don't understand what you are talking about. Avoid any jargon that allows for multiple interpretations.
6. **Learn from your mistakes.** Look for ways to improve your CPT meetings. At the end of each meeting save 10 minutes to review how the meeting went and how it could be improved. Get feedback from participants and learn from that feedback.
7. **Take responsibility.** Participants can also use facilitation techniques in a CPT meeting, whether asking for clarification on a point, checking the time, using language that everyone will understand, or getting discussion back on track. If you see symptoms of a poor meeting, take the responsibility to assure that the next meeting will be much more manageable.

A Crash Course in Communication

Talking is easy; communication (which means an exchange or communion with another) requires great skill. Communication demands that we listen and speak skillfully, not just talk mindlessly. Interacting with fearful, angry, or frustrated people can be even more difficult, because we're less skillful when caught up in emotions. Here are a few tips for better communication:

- **Don't take another person's reaction or anger personally, even if they lash out at you in what seems a personal manner.** Another person's mood or response is more likely about fear or frustration than it is about you as an individual. Take a deep breath and count to 10, and see it as a way of letting the other person vent before he is able to communicate what's really on his mind.
- **You don't have to have all the answers. It's OK to say, "I don't know."** If you want to find out, say so, then follow up to share your findings.
- **Respond (facts and feelings); don't react (feelings).** For example, "Tell me more about your concern" or "I understand your frustration" instead of "Hey, I'm just doing my job" or "It's not my job" (which is likely to cause more frustration and irritation). Share responsibility for any communication in which you're a participant, and realize that sometimes, maybe often, your own personal reactions may be causing your frustrations about communicating with others.
- **Understand that people want to feel heard more than they care about whether you agree with them.** It's strange how many people complain about others not hearing them, yet they don't listen to others either! You can show that you're listening by giving someone your complete attention and saying things like:
 - "Tell me more about your concern."
 - "What is it about ----- that concerns you?"
 - "I'm interested in what you've just said. Can you share a little bit about what led you to that belief?"
 - "What would have to happen for you to be more comfortable with -----?"
- **Remember that what someone says and what we hear can be amazingly different.** Our personal assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. Repeat back or summarize to ensure that you understand. Restate what you think you heard and ask, "Have I understood you correctly?"
- **Acknowledge inconvenience or frustration and offer a timeline, particularly if you need someone else's cooperation or your activities will affect them.** For example, informing the CPT that the family assessment/case plan has not been done yet, but is scheduled for next Tuesday. Express that you understand this is inconvenient for them but that it will allow for a much better assessment with more time spent with the family.
- **Don't offer advice unless asked.** This can be tough, particularly if we have experience that we think might benefit another person. Use respectful expressions such as, "One potential option is..." or "one thing that helped me in a similar situation was..." People take this much better instead of "You should do ..."

- **Look for common ground instead of focusing solely on differences.** One way to begin discovering commonality is to share your underlying intention, for example, “My intention of sharing my experience on this with you is to help us all succeed on this task.”
- **Remember that change is stressful for most people, particularly if your activities affect them in a way that they aren’t scheduling or controlling.**
- **Improve your listening skills.** Most people think they listen well, but the truth is that most people don’t listen at all – they just speak and then think about what they’re going to say next. Good listening means asking good questions and clearing your mind of distractions, including what you are going to say next.

How to improve your listening skills

1. *Be present*
 - Resist distractions (noises, interruptions, fidgeting, prejudices, etc.)
 - Don’t do five things at once. Do one: listen to the person with whom you’re speaking
 - Demonstrate your full attention by leaning forward slightly, focusing on the speaker, and trying not to fidget
 - Follow the golden rule. Take a moment to realize that every person is important and deserves your attention. How does it feel to talk with someone who doesn’t seem to be listening, or be ignored or treated disrespectfully?
2. *Bracket*
 - Keep an open mind and be flexible to other’s ideas; release your need to be right, if only temporarily. Our need to be right can cause us to be contentious, or even inflammatory.
 - Don’t tune out because you disagree. You just have to listen and understand, not agree.
 - If you find yourself reacting to what another person says, your body language will communicate your reaction. Try saying, “You can probably see I’m reacting a bit, but it’s important to me to understand your point of view. Please tell me more about...”
3. *Reframe*
 - Ensure your understanding by saying something like, “I want to make sure I understood you correctly. You’re saying ...” or “So your concern (or idea) is ...”

6 Keys to Building a Great Team

adapted from Suzanne Willis Zoglio, PhD

1. *Commitment* – to the purpose and values of a team provides a clear sense of direction. Team members understand how their work enhances the system of child protection and agree that their goals are obtainable. The mission and protocol of the team has been developed with the input of all team members and therefore has created the foundation for the Child Protection Team.
2. *Contribution* – The power of an effective team is in direct proportion to the skills members possess and the initiative members expend. Teams need people who have strong skills and are willing to learn. Teams also need self-leaders who take responsibility for getting things done. But, if a few members shoulder all of the burden, the team runs the risk of member burnout, or worse, member turn-off.

To enhance balanced participation on a team, leaders should consider three factors that affect the level of individual contribution:

- *Inclusion* – leaders need to keep team members informed, solicit their input, and support an atmosphere of teamwork. If members are not offering suggestions at meetings, invite them to do so. If team members miss meetings, let them know they were missed. When ideas are offered, show appreciation for the initiative. The more individuals feel like part of the team, the more they will contribute; and the more they contribute the more they feel part of the team.
 - *Confidence* – in self and team affects the amount of energy a team member invests in a task. If it appears that the investment of hard work is likely to end in success, members will be more likely to contribute. The confidence of team members can be bolstered by providing feedback, coaching, assessment and professional development opportunities.
 - *Empowerment* – when workers are involved in decisions, given the right training, and respected for their experience, they feel enabled and will invest more.
3. *Communication* – For a team to reach its full potential, members must be able to say what they think, ask for help, share new or unpopular ideas, and risk making mistakes. This can only happen in an atmosphere where team members show concern, trust one another, and focus on solutions, not problems. Communication, when it is positive, open and friendly, plays a vital role in creating cohesiveness.

Friendly communications are more likely when individuals know and respect one another. Team members show caring by asking about each other's lives outside of work, respecting individual differences, joking and generally making all feel welcome. Open communication is equally important to a team's success. To assess team performance, members must provide honest feedback, accept constructive criticism, and address issues head-on. To do so requires a trust level supported by direct, honest communication. Positive communication

impacts the energy of the team. When members talk about what they need, like, or want it is quite different from complaining about what annoys or frustrates them.

4. *Cooperation* – Success of a team depends upon the degree of interdependence recognized within the team. Leaders can facilitate cooperation by highlighting the impact of individual members on team member behaviors. The following F.A.C.T.S. model of effective team member behaviors may serve as a guide for helping teams identify behaviors that support cohesiveness within the team.
 - Follow-through: One of the most common phrases heard in teams that work well together is “You can count on it.” Members trust that when a fellow team member agrees to return a phone call, write a report, or contact a new resource person, the job will be done. Team members are keenly aware that as part of a team, everything they do (or don’t do) impacts someone else.
 - Accuracy: Clearly a reflection of personal pride, also demonstrates a commitment to uphold the standards of the team, thus generating team pride.
 - Creativity: Innovation flourishes on a team when individuals feel supported by other team members. Although taking the lead on a new task is sometimes risky for people, such risk is greatly reduced in a cooperative environment where members forgive mistakes, respect individual differences, and shift their thinking from a point of view to a viewing point.
 - Timeliness: When team members are truly cooperating they respect the time of others by turning team priorities into personal priorities, arriving for meetings on time, sharing information, clustering questions for people, and communicating succinctly.
 - Spirit: Being on a team is a bit like being part of a family. You can’t have your way all of the time, and – to add value – you must develop a generous spirit. Leaders can help teams by addressing these “rules” of team spirit: value the individual; develop team trust; communicate openly; manage differences; share successes; and welcome new members.
5. *Conflict Management* – It is inevitable that teams will experience conflict from time to time. The problem is not that differences exist, but in how they are managed. If people believe that conflict never occurs in “good” groups, they may sweep conflict under the rug. Of course, no rug is large enough to cover misperception, ill feelings, old hurts, and misunderstandings for very long. Soon the differences reappear. They take on the form of tension, hidden agendas, and stubborn positions. On the other hand, if leaders help teams to manage conflict effectively, the team will be able to maintain trust and tap the collective power of the team. Teams manage conflict better when members learn to shift their paradigms (mindsets) about conflict in general, about other parties involved, and about their own ability to manage conflict. Three techniques that help members shift obstructing paradigms are:
 - Reframing: looking at the glass half-full instead of half-empty. Instead of thinking, “If I address this issue, it’ll slow down the meeting,” consider this

thought: “If we negotiate this difference, trust and creativity will all increase.”

- **Shifting Shoes:** a technique used to practice empathy by mentally “walking in the shoes” of another person. You answer questions such as “How would I feel if I were that person being criticized in front of the group?” “What would motivate me to say what that person just said?”
 - **Affirmations:** positive statements about something you want to be true. For example, instead of saying to yourself right before presenting a case, “I’m going to blow it, I just know it” force yourself to say, “I am calm, comfortable and well prepared.” If team members can learn to shift the negatives into positives, they will be able to shift obstructing paradigms and manage conflict more effectively.
6. *Connections* – A cohesive team can only add value if it pays attention to the ongoing development of two important connections: to the larger organizations (the courts, families, etc.) and to the individual team members. When a team is connected to the organization, members discuss performance in relationship to the priorities, and feedback of the court system and the families they work with. Teams should consider their needs in light of what’s good for the court and families and what will best serve each of them. Leaders can encourage such connection by keeping communication open. When a team has developed strong connections among its own members, peer support manifests itself in many ways. Members volunteer to help each other without being asked, cover for each other in a pinch, congratulates each other publicly, share resources, offer suggestions for improvement, and finds ways to celebrate together. A few ideas for developing and maintaining such connections might be: allow time before meetings for brief socialization, schedule team lunches, create occasional team projects outside of work, take training together, and provide feedback to one another on development.

To develop an effective CPT it must have a strong leader willing to take on the task of ongoing development of the team and the individual team members. Individual team members must be committed to the CPT and truly believe in the work that the CPT will do. In essence, the true winners of a successful team are the team members, the children and families, as well as the court systems that we work with.