

"Facilitating Great Coalition Meetings," 5/21/09 OSA/MESAP Conference Call

BALANCING GROUP DECISIONS WITH OTHER FACTORS...

Q: How can I make sure that coalition members feel like their voice and input is valuable, while also making sure that any final decisions also reflect grant requirements, evidence-based practices, strategic priorities, etc.?

A: This is quite a challenge for any coalition, committee, or task force. Here are some ideas that might help to prevent disappointment while reinforcing the importance of the group's ideas and decisions:

- As you recruit your committee, or as new members join: Be up front about the role of the committee or team, as well as any specific goals, objectives, funding requirements, resource limitations (including your staff time availability), commitment to evidence-based practices, and commitment to your strategic plan priorities. Also be very clear with members about why they personally were invited to the team, and why their particular expertise and ideas are so important for guiding the committee's work.
- Before any brainstorming session, you may want to remind the group of how the process will be used. For example: "We need your ideas. Be creative! Don't hold back! There are no right or wrong ideas. After the brainstorm, we will work together as a group to select **two or three** to work on. Even though we might just end up working on one idea in the end, brainstorming is a way to make sure that we have enough ideas to choose from—Otherwise, that final idea might have never happened."
- Before any planning session, you may also want to remind the group of how the process will be used. For example: "Here is the basic idea that we're working on. We need your expertise and feedback to help figure out some of the details [to make it a reality, to make the project appealing to our intended audience, to solve some barriers we've run into, etc.]. What do you think about the idea overall? What do you think about X, Y, Z?"
- Be sure not to mislead group members into thinking a decision is final if it really isn't. For example, a group might be very excited to move forward with a particular project, but you as the coordinator still need to find out more information: Is it really doable with available resources? Does it really fit with evidence-based practices? Does it fit with your grant requirements? Does it fit with your organization's mission? Are there any other project partners or supervisors that will need to approve it first? To help avoid disappointment, be clear in the beginning that the voting process is to decide and clarify what the GROUP wants – not necessarily the final product.
- You may want to close an agenda item by saying, for example: "Thank you –It looks like everyone is in clear agreement about X, Y, Z. This has been very helpful. Now I will take your recommendations, find out how they mesh with [the research/our budget/our workplan/OSA's requirements/etc], and get back to you." Then, let them know how you will follow up with them: "I will get back to you next week with an update over [email/phone], to let you know what I find out and whether we need any more guidance from the group."
- **After the meeting, be sure to keep all members informed and up to date about any progress or changes in plans, as well as requesting any feedback along the way. Also, always give group members the courtesy of having information BEFORE you release it to the public!** It can be incredibly disheartening to members to take the time and effort to go to a meeting, share their ideas and make decisions, and then not receive any news of the project until they see it in the newsletter!