

## Chapter 2

# Working Into Interaction

- The Bare Minimum for Meetings
- Steps toward Interaction

**T**here are certain elements, which we call the “Bare Minimum,” that are essential for a well-run meeting. Facilitating meetings according to the Bare Minimum standards will immediately help to improve any group’s productivity, and adhering to these standards is a great start on the road to a fully interactive approach.

Your personality and the nature of the meetings you facilitate are the prime determinants of how quickly and completely you implement the Interactive Meeting Format, described in chapter 4. If you are a fearless facilitator with a group that is open to a new approach, we urge you to plunge right in using the Bare Minimum plus all the elements of the format. Under other circumstances, you may prefer to concentrate on the Bare Minimum for a few meetings, then gradually take the “Steps toward Interaction” recommended in this chapter.

Whichever approach you take, the Bare Minimum standards should always be your baseline.

## The Bare Minimum for Meetings

There is a lot involved in being a skilled group facilitator, but let’s start with the absolute basics:

1. **An Agenda.** You need to come to the meeting with a coherent, written agenda that will move the group toward achieving its goals. During the meeting, work with the agenda in a thoughtful way—that is, assume that you will stay with the agenda, but if a topic or point of discussion comes up that clearly needs to be dealt with, be flexible enough to make room for it on the agenda. Ideally, you would go over the agenda at the beginning of the meeting; see p.37.
2. **For Action-oriented Meetings, a Note-taker.** Every day, people make decisions at meetings and volunteer for tasks, then leave the meetings with no record of what has occurred. When the group reconvenes, people may have different recollections of what was decided and no one may be able to remember exactly who was responsible for particular tasks. This is not the path to productivity. To set out on a different path, make it a priority to find someone (ideally someone you are sure has the capacity to do the job well) to take minutes, or at least to take notes about the group’s decisions and individuals’ responsibilities. This person should also be willing to make copies of their minutes (or notes) and distribute them to all group members, including those not in attendance at the meeting. If no one is willing to take on this task, write all decisions and responsibilities on the board or flip chart during the meeting, and bring this to the next meeting for reference.
3. **Introductions.** Beginning on p. 41, you can read about how knowing other people’s names contributes to the success of a meeting. Even if you are not ready to ask the group to work on actually

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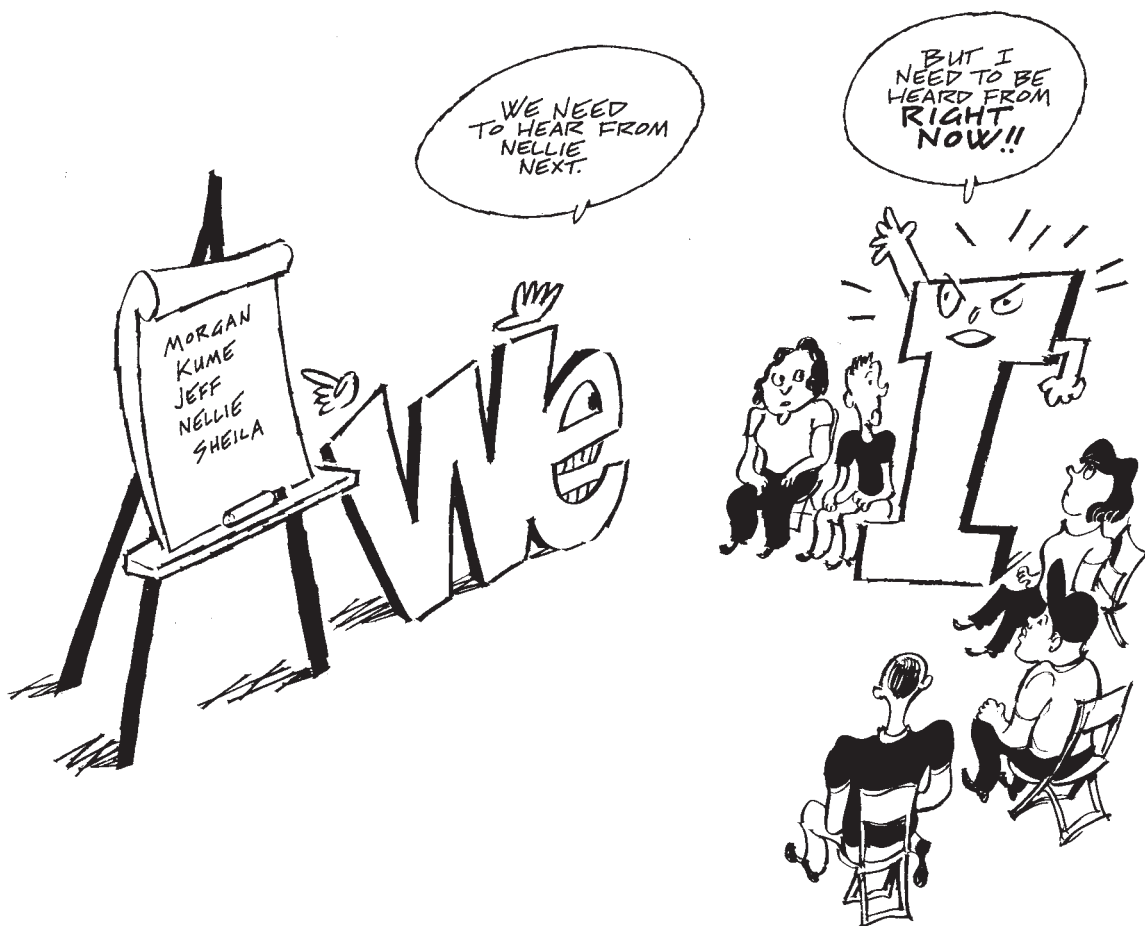
learning names, the Bare Minimum calls for a go-around introduction, in which everyone introduces themselves to the group.

4. **A Speaking Order.** As facilitator of a meeting, you need to be active, alert, and focused in order to create an environment where everyone can be heard. Ask people to raise their hands when they wish to speak, and let them speak in order. If several people raise their hands at once, indicate the speaking order and stick to it. (For example, “Moving from left to right, first we’ll hear from Joe, then Sonia, Gloria, and Ted.”)

To make the speaking order work, you need to be firm. People may not be used to having a speaking order at meetings; some may try to ignore the order and to jump in whenever they have something to say. It is essential that you enforce the order and not allow people to speak out of turn.

Your own contributions to a discussion must also be part of the speaking order. You need to recognize yourself to speak in the same way that you recognize others, being careful not to violate the order in which group members have signaled their desire to speak.

Keeping the speaking order is not easy in some groups, and you also must balance the speaking



order with the need to follow the agenda. If, for example, someone persistently brings up points unrelated to the subject at hand, you can gently insist that all comments be on topic. Tell the group that if someone wishes to speak about another topic, it can be placed on the agenda and dealt with later if there is time, or at a subsequent meeting if necessary.

In most meetings, there is at least one person who has something to contribute but finds it difficult to break into the discussion. Others, of course, have no such difficulty, and these are the people whose voices are typically heard. Without a speaking order, those who are the most assertive tend to dominate the conversation, while those with a quieter and sometimes more thoughtful approach tend to be silent, and may eventually become disengaged from the decision-making process. The effective use of a speaking order prevents any one person from dominating the conversation and allows everyone an equal chance to be heard.

At first it may appear to you that the speaking order is not having the desired effect; the quieter members of the group may not be raising their hands to speak and it may still seem that they do not have anything to contribute to the discussion. For people whose habit is to be silent, it may take several meetings before they gain enough trust in the new system and confidence in themselves to begin participating. If people continue not to participate after several meetings, rather than giving up on a speaking order you should move toward implementation of the Interactive Meeting Format. Thoughtfully chosen Warm-up Questions and Springboard Exercises can open people up and bring them in as fully participating members of the group.

Your job as facilitator is to make room for everyone in the conversation. This is not easy, but it is essential.

5. **A Clear Ending Time.** Be clear at the beginning about the time the meeting will end, and strive to complete the meeting by that time. If discussion is intense and more time is needed, check with the group to see if they wish to set a new ending time.
6. **A Summary of Next Steps.** As the meeting is concluding, summarize the meeting's accomplishments and the next steps toward achieving the group's goals. For an action-oriented group, ask the note-taker to recap the decisions made and responsibilities assigned.

These elements of good facilitation are not enough to make a meeting truly interactive, but they do set up a comprehensible environment in which people see how the group is going to make progress and they know what they have to do in order to contribute their ideas.

Everything you read about group facilitation in this book presumes that you are at least running meetings according to the Bare Minimum requirements. The rest of the book is about building an interactive structure on this solid platform.

## Steps toward Interaction

If you have implemented the Bare Minimum standards and found your meetings much improved, you may be tempted to stay at that level and not move toward further interaction. This is a natural tendency, but you should not give in to it; these improvements represent only the beginning of what can be achieved through the thoughtful implementation of the *Moving Beyond Icebreakers* approach. Instead of resting on your initial accomplishments, take the next steps.

**Use Warm-up Questions.** With the Bare Minimum in place, the next step in moving your group toward interactive meetings is the Warm-up Question (unless your group is too large—see the table on p. 39). Chapter 10 lists more than 100 ideas for Warm-up Questions, and you can learn about the purposes and procedure starting on p. 39.

In the beginning, and especially if the group is likely to have a lot of resistance, you may want to start with questions that are directly related to the work of the meeting. Here are some examples:

- Say your name and one reason you think it's important to work on this issue.
- Say one thing you liked or didn't like about the story we read for today.
- Say a phrase to describe what you want to accomplish today.

Emphasize that everyone should keep their answers brief, and that there should be no discussion of people's answers until the appropriate time in the agenda. If you control the Warm-up Question and do not allow it to become too lengthy, people will be receptive to adding this element to the agenda.

Provocative or disturbing feelings or ideas may come to the surface during the Warm-up Question—for example, someone may express fundamental disagreement with some aspect of the group's work. While initially you may feel dismayed by this, you should recognize that surfacing true feelings is one of the reasons for doing interactive exercises. When negative feelings remain below the surface, they cannot be dealt with. If they come out during the Warm-up, you and the rest of the group can work with them. See chapter 1 for a further discussion of the importance of surfacing dissension.

**Do BRAINSTORMING.** Another aspect of interactive work that you can easily bring in to a meeting is BRAINSTORMING (p. 385). This is a familiar concept to many people and you will probably not encounter resistance when you design your agenda to include a Brainstorm. Be aware, however, that often facilitators use the term "Brainstorm," but they do not actually follow the procedure that makes BRAINSTORMING a powerful interactive technique. When you introduce BRAINSTORMING, be sure to enforce the rules, especially about not discussing ideas during the Brainstorm.

**End with Evaluations.** Finally, as you are easing your group into the Interactive Meeting Format, you can begin to include the Evaluation component (p. 48). Chapter 18 describes several evaluation techniques, but with most groups of up to 20 people, you can do a simple EVALUATION SCALE (p. 422) from 1 to 10.

**Add More Elements.** Once the group is accustomed to these elements of the format, you can begin to include a Springboard Exercise (see p. 43) and to do more of the work of the meeting by means of Work Exercises (see p. 45), as appropriate.

**Deal with Resistance.** At any point along the way, you may encounter resistance from others and from within yourself. Dealing with the resistance of the group and your own resistance is the most fundamental element of becoming an effective facilitator.

Please read chapter 3 so that you will be better prepared to deal with resistance when it arises. Above all, don't be discouraged as you begin to bring interactive methods into your group. What you are trying to accomplish won't always work according to your plan, and you may feel that your efforts to change the meeting culture are not yielding the results that you hoped for. If you give yourself time and remain consistent, the gains will come and will be a substantial reward for your hard work.