

# Tips For Leading Productive Discussions

Discussion can be a powerful means of enabling your team to engage actively with projects and develop solutions based on sound critical thinking.

Or it can be a manager's worst nightmare, in which your employees stare back blankly, waiting for someone to take the initiative. Unlike many good dinner conversations, team discussions are purposeful and require preparation.

Having a good discussion depends on four basic factors:

- **The discussion must have a purpose.**
- **Team members must have something to say.**
- **Everyone must feel comfortable participating.**
- **Meaningful questions must be asked.**

If you find your group discussions are lagging, look for a weakness in one or more of these factors. Here are a few specific suggestions for improving discussion.

## **Give the discussion a purpose**

- Identify objectives for discussion; plan your questions accordingly.
- Explain clearly how discussion fits into your project as a whole.
- Clarify purpose when closing the discussion: summarize key points; ask everyone to write down a question they are left with at the close of discussion (and try to come back to these at an appropriate time).
- Have each team member come to the meeting with a written question related to the topic.

## **Encourage everyone to feel comfortable participating**

- Provide a written set of ground rules for discussion.
- Control discussion monopolizers to give everyone a chance to participate.
- Reward participation with both verbal and non-verbal cues ("That's a good point." "Would anyone else care to comment?" Nodding and maintaining eye contact.)
- Make connections between your team members' comments to encourage dialogue.
- Call on nonparticipants. (This will be less threatening if they have had an opportunity to prepare ahead of time).
- Be tactful in correcting misinformation.

## **Effective questioning strategies**

- **Brainstorming:** Initiate discussion by asking everyone to uncritically generate ideas, which are written on a flip chart. The discussion can then proceed to organize, synthesize, or evaluate the ideas generated.
- **Recall or comprehension questions** are useful for checking understanding of available facts.
- **Analysis questions** are suitable for helping break ideas down into component parts.
- **Application questions** ask the team to apply a concept and consider how will it work in practice.
- **Synthesis questions** guide the team to pull together ideas to create a new theme, or to consider implications.
- **Evaluation questions** encourage choices based on facts.

## **Pitfalls to avoid**

- Try to start by making it clear you value their ideas, and are not leading a "say what the boss wants" session.
- Allowing misunderstandings pass without correction.
- Assuming team members start with the same level of understanding you have.
- Getting angry or frustrated if your team isn't participating. Instead, try switching gears or go back to brainstorming.