

Let People Be Responsible

By Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff

The owner of a shipping company ordered up a new oil tanker. He employed our friend, the late Gunnar Hjelholt, as consultant to lead the ship's crew in designing a new work system. None had ever shared decision-making, and they struggled through several meetings. They wanted Gunnar to tell them what they should do. "My comment," he recalled, "was, 'Who is responsible for this ship?'" (article based on Principle 4, *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!*, 2007)

There are many forces in society and in us that work against people taking responsibility. We defer to people in

power, we look to experts for solutions and magicians to entertain us, we sink into self-doubt when facing ambiguity and seek heroes to insure our safety.

No wonder people expect anybody who leads a meeting to do most of the work for them. If you have ever led a board or staff meeting, you know the drill. People expect you to tell them what to do. If you don't, they accuse you of laissez-faire leadership. If you do, they say, "That's not what we meant."

Having led a non-profit for 15 years, we are well aware of the game

that goes on between those who seek to serve those who serve society. It so happens, however, that our members are dedicated to running effective strategic planning meetings. Doing this work with hundreds of colleagues worldwide, we have had to learn some ways to get others sharing the load.

In this article we present a philosophy and some simple practices for leading meetings in a way that encourages shared responsibility. Many people have proved their efficacy in diverse cultures. To get to this place, we have had to drop cherished methods going

back decades. We now get more done in meetings, whatever their length, than when we believed that everything hinged on us. Whether you reject or embrace our philosophy, we predict that you will be more mindful from now on of your own assumptions when all eyes are on you.

Six Ways for Sharing Responsibility

1. Accept That Everybody Is Doing The Best They Can.

When you own this assumption, you will worry less and accomplish more. Suppose you truly believed that whatever people do in your meetings is the best they are capable of at that moment?

What if you saw your impatience, judgments and stereotypes as bottlenecks keeping people dependent? Suppose you decided that instead of pushing the river, you would clear the debris and watch it flow? What would you do differently?

Years ago we learned that we were ignorant of whole spectrums of human experience that sat before us in meetings. We were tempted to analyze other people's motives. Nothing reduces anxiety like putting a label on something that bothers you. There are more ways to describe human behavior than stars in the galaxy and grains of sand on the beach.

"They are in denial, because they don't want to be blamed for failure."

"He'll do anything for attention."

"She's afraid of looking bad."

"He's passive"

"She's aggressive."

"They're out to sabotage the meeting."

"They are victims of cultural myopia" (or sexism, or racism, or ageism or whatever you fear).



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When you act on these diagnoses, you move into risky territory. You may be right, wrong, partly right, partly wrong or simply in Wonderland with Alice. The more diverse a group the more interpretations there are for any bit of behavior and the more likely you are to miss the mark.

Some years back we decided that if we were going to look for defensive behavior we would find it everywhere. Ditto resistance. Once you commit to leading people as you find them, you spare yourself a lot of anxiety and conserve your energy for doing what you are able to do. There is something about accepting others just the way they are that contributes greatly to community and builds trust. You can then make the purpose, goal, and task the driving forces.

Never assume you know what's going on. A colleague of ours was facilitating an intense discussion among a global corporation's top executives. "People had so much energy," she reported, "they didn't even stop for a break." Suddenly everything came to a halt. Everyone stopped talking and averted their eyes. "The CEO looked at me to do something," she continued. "My thoughts began racing. They're not being honest with each other. They've hit a wall and are backing off. I have to do a summary to help them get unstuck. Instead, I asked, 'What are your thoughts at this point?' A voice from the back piped up, 'Hey, we need a bathroom break!'"

2. Let People Hide Their "Hidden Agendas.

We never ask people what they are not saying. We see this as a form of subtle coercion that undermines a group's willingness to accept responsibility. If people wish to conceal their "real" feelings or "real" data, that is a choice they must live with. Their choice is, for us, the real data. In our philosophy, people have a right to hold back.

So we encourage but don't demand openness. Our philosophy is that the driving force for a meeting ought to be its purpose. We hold ourselves responsible for

keeping the task front and center. We push into sensitive areas only when we believe that an issue is directly related to achieving the goal. The test for us is whether people keep working on the task despite what they hold back.

Example: Who's Gorilla Is It, Anyway?

The founder/executive director of a successful non-profit asked us for help in reorganizing. The agency had grown in 30 years from a local office to 2000 employees in several states. While planning a reorganization meeting, the director let drop that he was thinking of retirement. The staff seemed glad that he had brought it up; no one asked if he had a timetable or succession plan.

We asked the director how he would handle his retirement plan in the upcoming meeting. The agency prided itself on its open climate. He said he had nothing specific to offer, but certainly would address the issue if it came up. Prior to the meeting we heard anxious hallway chatter about the director's plans. What was he going to do?

The 60-person meeting went off without a hitch. The director involved himself fully, encouraging people to think and act "outside the box." During 2 1/2 intense days, people decentralized their corporate offices, setting up teams to deal with far-flung programs. Nobody said the "R" word. Near the end we wondered if we ought to get out in the open what was on everybody's mind. When we asked the director during a coffee break, he smiled enigmatically. We concluded that if no one saw fit to name the 800-pound gorilla in the room, then neither would we. Five years later the director was still talking about retiring, the organization was still growing, and people still buzzed in the halls.

3. Do Less So That Others Will Do More.

If you want others to take responsibility, we urge you to try doing less than usual. Nature hates a vacuum. When you step back, others come forward. If you believe everyone is doing their best now, you will not need to make them better. The biggest challenge we

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face as a species is learning to work with one another just the way we are, shortcomings, style defects, prejudices, and all. Each time you move to fix a person or group, you deprive someone of the chance to do something constructive.

The only way to find out how much people will take on is to give them opportunities they never had. The more you busy yourself—explaining, rationalizing, interpreting, justifying—the less room there is for other people. They will sit back, watch you work, and evaluate your style. Should you get into what's eating them, they may fight back, requiring you to become a resistance expert. That is a zero-sum game that takes people far from their task.

There was a time when we did all of the writing on flip charts, organized people's issues into categories and summarized what was said. Now, we invite group members to cluster, edit and organize their own information. There was a time when we put handouts on every chair. Now we put them in a prominent place and invite people to help themselves.

Restrain yourself from making decisions that affect everyone, whether it's a schedule change, a task change or whether to follow the agenda. Preempting people's choices may have unintended consequences. Some people abdicate all decisions and become more passive. Others fight the decision at the expense of the task.

Example: "This is a waste of time!"

Shem Cohen was helping a 40-person non-profit group plan a capital campaign. The meeting began with a review of the organization's history. Suddenly he found himself confronted by two angry participants. "They wanted to skip most of the day's agenda and get right to action plans," he recalled. They said their time was being wasted. The emotionality seemed all out of proportion to the situation.

"I told them that I appreciated them bringing their concerns to me and that that we needed to consult with the whole group." Shem put the decision to everyone. After 15 minutes discussing pros and cons, all agreed to continue as planned. "The best outcome for

me," he continued," is that the people who brought up the issue felt heard and agreed to stay engaged. I was prepared to scrap the design if that's what most people wanted."

4. Encourage Self-Management.

The advice that follows applies most directly to facilitators. If you are an executive or board chair reading this you might consider the implications when you choose to lead a large meeting or hire people to run such meetings for you. Assigning several facilitators, amateur or pro, to small groups in a large group meeting has an unintended consequence. It deprives people of a chance to act responsibly. Most small groups can organize their work without formal leaders or facilitators if the task matters.

A Helpful Mechanism

One helpful mechanism that we offer when working with several small groups is a "self-manager guide." We suggest but do not insist that people take roles as recorder, reporter, timekeeper, and/or discussion leader. One reason the two of us find it easy to manage groups of 80, for example, is that we have 40 people helping us! In you have groups of eight, half the people in the room are always in leadership roles. That's a big burden off of you!

What If Small Groups Have Trouble?

We also know that some small groups don't click. We don't go looking for problems. If a small group is struggling, we become involved if they invite us. Otherwise, we stick to managing conversations among the whole. We believe there is a learning curve in self-management. Our job is to be patient and provide support. Moreover, inviting small groups to be responsible can have larger consequences for a system.

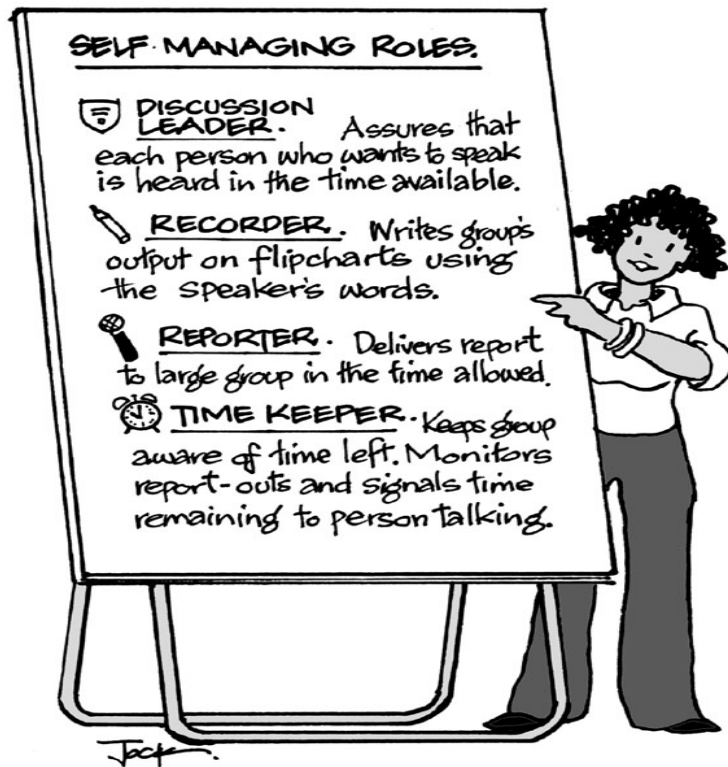
Example: Encouraging employee-owners to take charge.

Netafim, owned by three community collectives ("kibbutzim") in Israel, develops, sells and implements irrigation systems. In the early 2000's its management set out to get employees, most of whom

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also were owners, to accept more responsibility. Assisted by their consultants, Avner Haramati and Tova Auerbach, they organized an “open space” meeting in which group members propose and organize their own agendas. They invited “the whole system”—e.g. employees, workers, board members and managers from abroad.

After one self-managed session on “enhancing innovations,” an employee/owner started a department for innovations that increased the company’s patent flow the next year. “People don’t complain any more,” said one manager. “They either initiate and act or remain silent. They know that the road is open for them to take a lead on issues that bother them.”

5. Contain Your “Hot Buttons”

One way to help yourself hold back is to pay attention to the little voice in your head that expects, insists, demands, that meetings be perfect, that goals be clear, that each person behave with decorum, that anxiety dissolve into laughter, that enmity turn to support, that

presentations be short and pointed, that questions be insightful, answers terse, action steps as inevitable as night following day, and, should any of these things not happen, it is YOUR fault. Your internal critic, alas, wants what it cannot have. You will get more of what you want, when you turn off the little voice. At the very least, turn down the volume.

Effective restraint requires us to work on ourselves. We have learned a great deal about leadership from studying our own inner impulses—to be perfect, look good, fix everything, be responsible for what people do or don’t do. We urge you to do likewise. Your clues rarely emerge as a blinding flash of insight. Rather, notice those times when you get agitated, jiggle your knees, make faces, cringe at an untoward remark, or feel the impulse to contradict what you hear. Hold off a few seconds any time you want to jump in and correct somebody or challenge a statement.

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Example: Letting Provocation Be “Like Wind Through a Tree”

A colleague was leading a strategic planning process for a successful professional group. At one meeting, he was confronted by a wealthy participant whose agenda was to control the organization. “The way he did it was through a personal attack on me,” said our colleague, “since I had been contracted by the Board to manage the process. ‘Who are you,’ he asked. ‘What are you doing here? What kind of house do you live in?’” All sorts of irrational things went through my head. Yes, I wasn’t as financially successful as these people (but they didn’t know that). I didn’t live in a mansion or routinely stay in 5 star resort hotels!

“...hold off until each person who wants to talk has had their say.”

“Instead of trying to convince people I deserved to be at the table, I let the remarks pass through me like wind through a tree. My first consulting principle is that the only thing I can control is my response to situations. I reiterated the goals of the meeting and asked if these were still relevant in light of the conversations to that point. I asked how they would like to proceed. When I ignored the bait, the person in question calmed down and participated productively for the rest of the meeting.”

6. Encourage Dialogue

Make your meetings safe for dialogue. By dialogue we mean that those who wish to speak can say what they think, feel, want or intend, while others listen.

If discussion, debate, decisions or solutions are called for, hold off until each person who wants to talk has had their say. You will have a radically different experience in a meeting after all participants have expressed themselves on a topic than if you and others react to each speakers’ views. You may never learn the range of perceptions in the room.

Dialogue Tops Intervention

People may not know their own stakes until they say them. People are more likely to change their behavior when they can hear others’ perceptions and state their own without having to sell or defend them. At the start of each meeting we tell people how important it is

to hear from anyone who wants to speak.

We emphasize that all ideas are valid. When we tell people it’s okay to be wherever they are, we also are telling them that what they make of the meeting is up to them. Seeking to establish that all ideas are valid, we provide a useful norm for defusing conflict.

Example: Legitimizing Opposition in A Tense Community Meeting

“Last year I was working in a rural area,” recalled meeting manager Lisa Beutler,” on an issue so contentious that the sponsor had security people to head off potential violence. I began the meeting with my ground rules. One, we are here because we want everyone’s ideas, even things you may consider ‘wrong’ or ‘silly.’ You are not required to promote or defend your ideas. Two, everyone here has a right to change their mind.

“During the meeting, one person that security was keeping an eye on got up and said he needed to tell the group that ‘Lisa, the facilitator, was trained in mind control techniques.’ The group was flabbergasted and told him to sit down.

“Now I invoked the ground rules. ‘This is what Jim is thinking right now, and you are not required to agree or disagree with him.’

“One woman said, ‘I came a long way to this meeting to find some answers,’ and others nodded agreement. People returned to the task. The disrupter (and his large contingent) got up and left. The community was still split over the issue but this was a huge turning point. They didn’t let the attack on the facilitator derail the meeting.

“Later I realized that by using the ground rule to cushion my own shock and to support the dissenter, the participants didn’t have to get into a confrontation. They could put their energy into what they came for.”



Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff are co-directors of Future Search Network whose members lead planning meetings in any language, any culture, for whatever people can afford. They also are authors of Future Search: An Action Guide, and have taught their methods to more than 3500 people worldwide. For more information, www.futuresearch.net.