



Dr. Rachel Goldberg

## *Life is Short; Work It Out ...*

# Is There Such a Thing As a Good Meeting?

By Dr. Rachel Goldberg

Well, we all know about bad meetings. I just read these on “Top Ten Tricks to Liven Up a Meeting” on the Comedy Zone online:

- Spill coffee on the conference table. Produce a little paper boat and sail it down the table.

- Bring a hand puppet, preferably an animal. Ask it to clarify difficult points.

- Complain loudly that your neighbor won’t stop touching you. Demand that the boss make him/her stop doing it.

Feels good, doesn’t it? Most meetings feel pointless, involve the same people saying the same things over and over again, and nothing seems to get done. Why? Because the wrong people are in the room, because the goal isn’t clear, because the meeting is run poorly (and this part has a lot packed into it), and even if you are lucky enough to decide something, no one takes clear enough notes to know what it was.

Well, it doesn’t have to be that way. There is actually (no, really, I swear) a skill to running a meeting, and the basic components are not hard to master. The skill is called “facilitation,” and that means that, among other things, someone gets really clear beforehand what the meeting is supposed to accomplish, and gets the right

people in the room to accomplish it. A good meeting agenda should have clear steps to get the task(s) accomplished with tentative times associated with each item. That will help the meeting designer actually plan for work that can be accomplished in the time available. You’ll need someone, hopefully with some facilitation training,



running the meeting, keeping everyone on track, and also making space for everyone to be heard. That means everyone will actually get the information they need.

Then you need someone capturing all the information so everyone knows what happened, and clarifying who will be responsible for following up on decisions. Imagine: a meeting where it is clear what the goal is, everyone who needs to, gets heard, real decisions get made taking into account all the real issues as if they mattered, and people actually take responsibility and things get done.

Now all of these need some skill to do well. If you want to learn more about it, I recommend the book *How to Make Meetings Work* by Doyle and Straus as a great place to start. If you want more, check out *The Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*

by Sam Kaner, et al. There are also skilled professional facilitators who can advise, train, design good meeting processes, and run them for you. If you have an important or complex issue you should think seriously about hiring some help. If you are interested in facilitation training or want to hire a professional facilitator, The Center for

Conflict Resolution at Salisbury University offers both. Contact them at **410-219-2873** or find them online at <http://www.conflict-resolution.org/>. If you are searching farther afield, check out Mediate.com, which is a well known listing for all kinds of conflict resolution business support at <http://www.mediate.com/index.cfm>.

Or, of course, you could spill coffee on the conference table and sail a little paper boat down the table.



.....  
*Dr. Goldberg has been active in the field of Conflict Resolution for over 25 years. She is a specialist in cross-cultural work, religion and conflict, and has done interpersonal, intergroup, and organizational mediation, facilitation, and other forms of conflict resolution. She is an Assistant Professor at Salisbury University.*

*For training, facilitations, or help resolving a conflict, contact the Center for Conflict Resolution at Salisbury University by calling **410-219-2873**.*