The power of Go/NoGo Questions

When meetings go wrong, the grumbling begins. The leader didn't have an agenda. The goals of the meeting weren't clear. One person monopolized the discussion. Key participants were unprepared. There were too many useless tangents. So whose job is it to fix broken meetings?

The standard view goes like this. The effectiveness of a meeting is the responsibility of the facilitator. They should create an agenda, which needs to be sent out in advance. During the meeting they should have clear goals and keep things on track. They need to make sure that key participants are prepared. It's their job to spot irrelevant tangents. Because the facilitator is typically the senior person in the room, they have hierarchical power. So when they fail to use their power to fix the meeting, this gives participants a license to grumble.

We see things differently. The effectiveness of a meeting is partly the responsibility of the facilitator, of course. But once discussion begins, the work—spotting ambiguity, surfacing risky assumptions, managing key unknowns—is almost entirely the responsibility of the attendees. The deepest sources of power in the room will usually be intellectual, not hierarchical, and the driver of effective discussion will usually turn out to be the questions, not the people.

Steering needs to be a shared responsibility, especially when the terrain is complex. No category of question can belong to one person. We would never accept a simplistic ground rule like this for Assumptions, or Clarification, or any other category, and we shouldn't accept it for Go/NoGo questions either. Every participant must be free and willing to ask any category of question, not just six out of seven.

MEETING BASICS

Different types of Go/NoGo questions shape different aspects of a meeting. One type creates the general outline.

- Is there an agenda?
- What is the desired outcome?
- How much time does each topic need?

When basic parameters like these are unclear, a meeting has little hope of being efficient. Asking these questions is a way of showing our respect, not just for everybody's time, but also for the complexity of the issues.

MEETING PARTICIPATION

A second kind of Go/NoGo question adjusts the configuration of participants.

- Do we have the right people in the meeting?
- Should a few people discuss this side issue off-line?
- Are we involving the speakerphone participants?

Not having the right people present, or not using the knowledge and talents of those who are, can lead to frustration—or another meeting to discuss the same thing. By keeping the participants and the goals in alignment, we draw out the best from everyone.

MEETING FOCUS

A third kind of Go/NoGo question is used to control the focus of discussion and guide forward movement.

- Is the group getting to the heart of the matter?
- In comments and answers are we giving too much information? Too little?
- Is the level of discussion too general? Are we too deep in the details?

In expressing concerns like these, we risk creating some degree of social discomfort. But there's also risk in not saying anything. For example, a group can spend so much time on a minor topic that there isn't enough time to adequately discuss an issue that is obviously more important and more complex. One sign that we have mastered the Go/NoGo question is that we have the courage to run small social risks in order to help our team avoid real business risks.

This Month's Practice

Grumbling and gnashing teeth is an ineffective response to ineffective meetings. It's not likely that one person can, with an occasional question, dramatically improve the quality of a group's meetings. But when a few people are consistently asking a few Go/NoGo questions, that is often enough to start turning things around. So share this Skill Sharpener with colleagues.

PRE-MEETING PRACTICE

Sometimes you know in advance that, unless something changes, a meeting will be poorly structured. Before the meeting, ask the organizer about the agenda, the goals, the attendees, or another important parameter. Don't try to fix everything; just focus on one aspect of the meeting. Think about how to phrase your question so that it minimizes the social awkwardness for you and for them. For advice about how to do this, review these Skill Sharpeners on our website: Are you avoiding asking? and How to soften impact without losing precision.

IN-MEETING PRACTICE

Sometime during a meeting stop and ask yourself questions like these: Are the right people participating? Are the people on the speakerphone saying anything? Should this topic be taken off-line? Is the group on a tangent? Once you have a found a question or comment that could improve the quality of the discussion, spend a few seconds thinking about the specific wording. On the one hand minimize the social awkwardness, but on the other hand be careful about ignoring the question just because you can't find a perfectly tactful way to phrase it.

POST-MEETING PRACTICE

For one day, at the end of each meeting, identify one Go/NoGo question you should have asked. What kept you from asking it? Did you make the right choice? What would you do differently?

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at LinkedIn.

For more about how PQ+A can dramatically shorten segments of discussion, read our Oracle Case Study here on our website.