
Meetings as a Strategy for Change

Pilot Draft*

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
and
BTW Consultants

April 2004

* We would appreciate any comments on this work in progress. Please send them to pbrest@hewlett.org

Meetings as a Strategy for Change

BACKGROUND

Meetings¹ are a ubiquitous, time-consuming, and often expensive feature of organizational life. They range from ad hoc meetings of two or three people to multi-day events with hundreds of speakers and thousands participants. To maximize the value of meetings, grantmakers who fund them and organizations that sponsor them must be clear about their objectives and must think strategically about both the benefits and costs of the events. A meeting is often only one of several available tools for achieving ones objectives, and its sponsors should be able to articulate its role among other strategies.

OBJECTIVES, THEORIES OF CHANGE, & WORKPLANS

A meeting is a strategy to achieve specific objectives. Thus, the decision to hold a meeting and its structure and content must be in the service of those objectives and should be based on a sound theory of change—a causal model that describes the beliefs and assumptions that underlie any effort to achieve an objective. Based on the theory of change, one develops a workplan both for the meeting and events preceding and following the meeting to achieve its goals.

The workplan for an effective meeting is characterized by clarity about and alignment among: the content of the meeting, its audience, its structure, staffing (speakers and facilitators), and activities preceding and following up to the meeting. To the extent that the components are clear and in good alignment, one dramatically increases the likelihood that a meeting, as a strategy, will be successful.

¹ We intentionally use the word “meeting” and eschew “convening,” derived from the verb “to convene,” which has become prevalent jargon in the nonprofit sector but is not common American usage. Since there are many adequate synonyms, including “meeting,” “workshop,” “seminar,” and “gathering,” we see no need to perpetuate this neologism.

Meetings That Falter or Fail Have...



- ✓ Speakers or moderators who are not well prepared.
- ✓ Inadequate time for active participation and discussion among those in attendance.
- ✓ Not rehearsed required technology.
- ✓ Presenters, speakers, or facilitators who fail to inspire (e.g., read text from PowerPoint).
- ✓ Not scheduled the appropriate time for the discussion at hand.

Meetings That Succeed Have...



- ✓ Taken the time to know their audience.
- ✓ Speakers, presenters and/or facilitators who have been vetted for presentation skill and content knowledge.
- ✓ Written agendas with a clear purpose and intended outcome.
- ✓ Adequate time allotted including time for participant engagement and networking.
- ✓ Effective methods for follow-up.
- ✓ Evaluations that are used to ensure continuous improvement.

TOOLS

This packet includes three tools that provide a series of questions to be asked of meeting planners or foundation staff in considering whether a meeting is the best strategy for accomplishing the desired results.

Putting the Problem in the Middle

Various Strategies, Used Alone or in Combination, Can Address the Problem



Once a meeting has been selected as an effective strategy, the next focus is on ensuring strong alignment among its elements to maximize success. In completing these tools, the following general questions will be answered:

- What is the problem being addressed?
- Is a meeting the right strategy to address the problem?
- Will the meeting be effectively executed?
- How will the meeting be evaluated?

A successful meeting will require a method for assessing its value and impact. Every proposal to organize a meeting should include a plan for evaluating its success – from a simple “plus/delta” exercise where participants reflect on what worked and what could be improved about a meeting, to a more rigorous assessment that includes key informant interviews, participant surveys, or even, for larger and annual events, focus groups.

This approach takes into account *explicit* and *implicit* purposes of formal meetings (see sidebar).

Explicit Purposes of Meetings

- Information exchange (education, training, airing concerns, etc.).
- Networking (facilitating relationships among participants).
- Action (reaching closure, making decisions, vote).
- Brainstorming (generating creative solutions).
- Problem-solving (discussing problems and alternative solutions).
- Pursuing policy, program, and research goals.

Implicit Purposes of Meetings

- Developing skills and knowledge.
- Increasing social capital (norms and networks enabling cooperation).
- Inspiring, encouraging, and supporting participants to promote change.
- Making a political statement.

SCORE CARDS

Included in this document are score cards to assess the probability of success, relative cost, and value of meetings. These are works-in-progress that will need to be discussed and tested. They are intended to facilitate the foundation's decision-making around whether to fund a meeting based both on the completion of the tools by the meeting planner and the relevance of the meeting to the foundation's own mission and goals.

Worthy of Note

These tools are meant to serve as helpful guideposts. Not all of the questions that are included will be relevant for every meeting. At the same time, however, the larger the investment of time and money one is considering with respect to organizing a meeting, the more time one should spend on a deliberate and systematic process for purposes of planning the event.

Making a Case for a Meeting

Successful meetings start with a clear sense of purpose. Proposals from groups planning formal meetings, particularly meetings that aim to shape the policy or cultural environment, should, therefore, explain the purpose of the meeting. Why is a meeting (rather than something else) the right strategy? Who will participate, and what is the intended result? Does the meeting have to occur in person or are there less expensive methods for bringing people and ideas together that will achieve the desired result?

The following are questions that meeting planners should ask themselves as they begin to formulate their “case” for a meeting. Please note that depending on the type of meeting one is planning, not every question will be relevant. Planners should appropriately select those questions that are pertinent given the nature of the meeting and the desired result.

Establishing the Rationale

1. What problem is the meeting trying to address?
2. What are the other ways in which this problem is being addressed (specific examples of strategies you or others are employing to address this problem)?
3. Why do you believe that ***a meeting is important*** for addressing this problem as opposed to ***other plausible alternative ways*** of addressing this problem?
4. Is there a window of opportunity for action on this problem, and if so, please describe?
5. Describe whether and how this meeting is (or will be) associated or linked with other strategies for addressing this problem/issue.
6. Why are you the right group to call the meeting? (Have you done it before? With what result?)

Results

7. If you hosted a similar event in the past, was it successful? (Please describe the success and how you knew it was a success.)
8. How have prior evaluation results been used in planning this meeting? (Please provide specific examples.)
9. What are the ***intended*** short- and long-term outcomes of the meeting (specific changes, actions, decisions or behaviors that will result)? In what time frames will they occur?

10. What follow-up activities will be necessary to ensure the *intended outcomes*, and who is responsible for ensuring the follow up activities occur?
11. How will you specifically measure whether the meeting has achieved its short- and long-term outcomes (refer to the menu of evaluation questions, sources, and methods in Tool #3)?

Defining and Targeting the Audience

12. Who must participate in this meeting (i.e., specific individuals or organizations to be involved) in order to assure a successful outcome? What is your rationale for group construct (e.g., thought-leaders versus constituency delegates)?
13. What will you do to ensure that the people needed to participate in order to achieve the *intended outcomes* do participate (method for inviting, follow-up, and incentives to attend – e.g., giving people particular roles or tasks in advance of the meeting)?
14. How many people will be invited, and how will you balance the ideal size with the need to have certain critical players participate?

Cost/Benefit

15. What do you see as the potential risks associated with this meeting?
16. What are the costs associated with this meeting? (Include the direct costs and staff costs associated with planning, executing, and follow-up. Also include the estimated value of time and cost of travel for participants.)
17. How will you cover the full cost of the meeting (cite revenue sources)?
18. Assuming that the meeting is successful at achieving its stated objectives, describe how the cost of planning and executing this event is justified – for example, as compared with other strategies?

TOOL #2

Effective Execution – Good Alignment

A good idea goes nowhere without good execution. The questions in Tool #1 should help to justify the selection of a meeting as a good strategy for accomplishing the desired results. It should also establish the credibility of the meeting planner as the right sponsor, as well as ensure the appropriate timing for the meeting.

The questions in Tool #2 guide the planner in determining what is essential for a well structured meeting, with the reasonable assumption that a well structured meeting has a greater likelihood of success. It is important to always keep the stated objective of the meeting at the center of the process and to ensure good alignment between the component parts:

- ✓ Content
- ✓ Resources
- ✓ Audience
- ✓ Speakers
- ✓ Structure/format
- ✓ Follow-up

Worthy of Note

There are many different approaches to organizing a meeting – from “virtual” to “open space technology.” It is well worth considering formats that haven’t been tried as an alternative to employing a format known to have failed.

The quality of a meeting is characterized most frequently by the meeting format, the preparation, the quality of the speakers, and the appropriateness of the content (and desired outcomes) given the time allotted for the discussion.

This tool should help a meeting planner anticipate the pitfalls in order to prepare a high-quality event. The process of effective meeting planning should include creative session design – thinking outside the conventional box to develop a framework that engages participants as critical contributors to the conversation.

Planning

1. Who has ultimate decision-making authority, including the control and allocation of resources associated with planning this event?
2. Should participants, speakers, or other partners be involved in designing this meeting? If so, how will they be involved?
3. What factors need to be taken into consideration in deciding the date and time of the meeting (specifically as it relates to events with efforts focused on the same problem)?
4. When and how will participants be reminded of the meeting time, place, and purpose, and how will they be inspired to attend and participate?

5. What materials will be prepared and distributed in advance of the meeting in order to prepare participants for the discussion?
6. Who will prepare those materials and by what date?
7. Describe how the flow, structure, and format of the meeting and its sessions relate to and support the achievement of the *intended outcomes* (length of meeting, session content, speakers, facilitators, session format, and follow-up). Have you spent time considering all of the various formats that might help you to achieve the desired objective and if so, what made you settle on your chosen format?
8. Is this meeting being planned as an in-person gathering or a virtual gathering? (Please describe the rationale for either.)

Participant Engagement and Networking

9. What information will be collected from participants who are scheduled to attend the meeting? How will that information be collected and shared?
10. How will speakers and panelists be prepared for their roles, and what steps will be taken to ensure that there is adequate time for audience/participant engagement?
11. Describe when and how during the course of the meeting adequate time and space is available for informal interchange among meeting participants?

Logistics

12. If you have panels with several speakers, what methods do you plan to use for keeping each speaker within his or her time allotment?
13. How will the meeting be led or facilitated? Will the leaders be internal or external to the sponsoring organization and why? (Describe the skills, background, or content knowledge required of meeting leaders to ensure success.)
14. If decisions will be made at the meeting, what is the process for deciding, referring, and tabling items?
15. Is there one designated individual responsible for meeting logistics (meeting space, seating, climate control, audio/visual equipment, charts/easels, paper, markers, tape, etc.)?
16. What is your specific plan for evaluation (Reference Tool #3)? Please formulate the evaluation plan in writing and attach it to this document.

Follow Up

17. How will discussions be recorded and documented for follow-up purposes?
18. What specific activities or tasks will be undertaken to follow-up after the meeting, and in what timeframe?
19. How will detailed content and process information from sessions be relayed back to event organizers/participants, and in what time frame?
20. Will the proceedings be shared? If so, with whom and for what purpose?
21. What process will you use to reflect on the results of the evaluation, and in what time frame? Who will be involved in that process?

TOOL #3**A Menu for Evaluating Success**

Every meeting should have a well-conceived evaluation plan. What follows is an evaluation menu of key questions, sources, and methods of data collection that meeting planners can draw from as appropriate for their intention and resources. The goal is not to answer every question but rather to select questions and methods as appropriate. This plan should be formulated and put in writing at the same time as planners are addressing other meeting logistics (in Tool #2).

Key Process Questions

Questions	Sources	Methods of Collection
1. Did the meeting attract the number of people it intended to attract?	Planning template Proposal Participant list	Document log
2. Did the people identified as necessary for a successful outcome actually attend or participate in the event?	Demographic summary Participant list	Document log
3. What worked and didn't work? (logistics, speakers, structure/format, content, materials)	Participants	Questionnaires/surveys
	Non-participants	Telephone interviews
	Early leavers	Exit interviews
	Event planners	Participant observation

Key Outcome Questions

Questions	Sources	Methods of Collection
4. To what extent (and how) did the meeting achieve its explicit purposes (desired result)?	Participants Organizers	Questionnaires/surveys Focus groups
5. To what extent (and how) did the meeting change participants' knowledge, skills, attitudes, aspirations, energy, sense of meaning, etc.? a) immediately following the meeting b) over time	Participants	Questionnaires/surveys Focus groups At intervals – immediate follow-up as well as longer-term follow-up
6. Did the meeting effectively connect with and support other strategies focused on the same problem?	Other strategy leaders	Questionnaires/interviews
7. Did the expected follow-up occur?	Organizers	Interviews
8. What were relationships between key actors like before and after the meeting?	Participants	Questionnaires/surveys Focus groups
9. To what extent did participants report increased access to influence or resources?	Participants	Questionnaires/surveys Focus groups
10. Did participants have the same expectations as the meeting planners?	Participants	Questionnaire/survey

Key Questions for Reflection

Questions	Sources	Methods of Collection
11. What would be done differently to better accomplish desired results? (attendance, representation, timing, logistics, content, speakers, follow-up)	Participants	Questionnaires/surveys
	Non-participants	Telephone interviews
	Event planners	Focus groups
	Speakers	Interviews
	Early leavers	Exit interviews
12. How will the results of this evaluation enable learning <i>throughout</i> the organization?	Evaluation report	Online dissemination Board debriefing

SCORE CARDS FOR FOUNDATION DECISION-MAKING

Once the meeting planner has completed the meeting planning tools, the foundation will determine whether to fund the event, and if so, at what level. These decisions will be based on a probability of success/cost/value analysis. We have prepared three score cards to assist in this process.

- ✓ The first score card asks foundation staff to rate the relative probability of success of the event based on the meeting planner's completion of the tools. How well conceived is the proposal to hold the meeting?
- ✓ The second score card asks the foundation to scale the relative investment in the meeting as compared with other investments within the foundation or other investments that can be made to address the problem at hand.
- ✓ The third score card asks the foundation staff to define the relevance and priority of the meeting content to the foundation's mission and program goals.

PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS SCORE CARD
How well-conceived are each of the following elements?

	0 Fundamentally Flawed Conception	1 Poor Conception	2 Plausible Conception	3 Strong Conception	4 Very Strong Conception
Idea					
Implementation					
Evaluation					
TOTAL PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS SCORE = [0-12/3]					

For each of the meeting elements – idea, implementation, and evaluation – we have provided prompt questions designed to elicit a yes/no answer (or some equivocation between the two). The idea is that the more "yes" answers one is able to offer, the higher the probability of success.

1. Idea

- ✓ Is the problem the meeting is meant to address clear and compelling?
- ✓ Is a meeting the right strategy for addressing the problem at this time?
- ✓ Do you have confidence that the target audience will participate?
- ✓ Does the cost justify the potential benefit?

2. Implementation

- ✓ Is this meeting on its way to being well planned?
- ✓ Do the elements appear to align with one another and lead to the stated objective?
- ✓ Is there a plan for follow-up or connection to other activities that appear to lead to success?

3. Evaluation

- ✓ Is there a plan for evaluating and reflecting on the results?
- ✓ Will the plan answer the central questions associated with the effort?
- ✓ Are there adequate resources devoted to the evaluation?

The probability of success scale is from 0 to 4. A score of 0 indicates that this area is ill-conceived, meaning that the answers to the prompt questions are all in the negative, while a score of 4 indicates a very high probability of success, suggesting that the answers are all in the positive. After making the ratings, the scores can be totaled to provide a total probability of success score.

A high total probability of success score suggests that the elements have been thoughtfully planned out and there is good reason to believe that the meeting will be successful. A low total probability of success score means that one or more elements are insufficiently conceived. This process could direct the foundation to provide financial support to one or more elements (idea, implementation, or evaluation) in order to strengthen the overall effort and increase the likelihood of a successful outcome.

COST SCORE CARD

What is the relative cost of the proposed meeting to the Foundation?

	0 Very Low	1 Low	2 Moderate	3 High	4 Very High
Investment Size					
TOTAL COST SCORE = [0-4]					

In order to complete the Cost Score Card the foundation will need to determine what the relative scale is for this cost assessment. This could vary from foundation to foundation as well as within a foundation. The relative cost could be based on the foundation’s overall average grant size. It could also be the investment as compared with average grant size for other meetings or similar events or it could be relative to investments in the same content area.

VALUE SCORE CARD

What is the value of the proposed meeting to the Foundation?

	0 Not At All	1 Low	2 Moderate	3 High	4 Mission- Critical
Relevance					
Priority					
TOTALVALUE = [0-8/2]					

In completing the Value Score Card, foundation staff should assign a “score” to the relevance and priority of the meeting content and outcomes to the foundation’s mission and goals.

SUMMARY SCORE CARD

	Probability of Success Score	Cost Score	Value Score
High – 4			
Moderate – 2			
Low – 0			