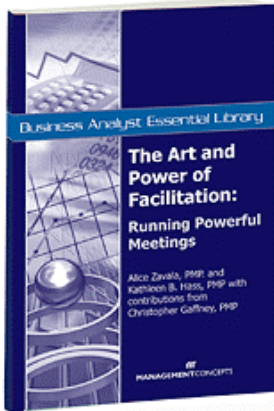


PM World Today Book Review



Book Title: *The Art and Power of Facilitation: Running Powerful Meetings*

Authors: Alice Zavala, PMP and Kathleen B. Hass, PMP

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Introduction to the Book

As our business lives become inundated with more and more meetings, we realize that time is precious and competition for participant focus and energy is fierce. We can all recall meetings which wasted time, created conflict and failed to meet stated goals. This book's title alone, The Art and Power of Facilitation: Running Powerful Meetings, immediately invokes an expectation that there is a way to turn away from unsuccessful meetings and experience effective ones. I was anxious to open the book and read.

The end result of this easy-to-read book is that it certainly meets the stated objective "to arm the reader with necessary skills and behaviors leading to effective facilitation and meeting management". In fact, it accomplishes much more than that. The target audience is the business analyst yet it reaches out to anyone facilitating or attending a meeting of any type. As a project manager, I found the information to be presented in a new light by re-emphasizing skills learned in the past and bringing them back into focus.

The authors, Alice Zavala and Kathleen B. Hass, are both experienced not only as business analysts but as professionals in project management with over 25 years experience each in the business environment. Their credentials include engagements in both commercial and federal organizations. They are certainly well qualified to author a book on the topic of powerful meetings.

Overview of Book's Structure

This book is well organized into nine chapters including a comprehensive index for key word reference. Each chapter opens with bullet points outlining the chapter's main headings and is concluded with Endnotes documenting the expert references cited by the authors. Figures and tables are used extensively and effectively to summarize and illustrate key points.

The first four chapters were, for this reader, the most powerful. Chapter 1 asks and answers the questions that are probably the most important but least often asked: is a meeting needed, are there alternatives to a meeting, and if not, what type of meeting best suits the need? Chapter 2 walks through the meeting process as if it were a project starting with defining the objective and documenting what is to be accomplished, then proceeding into the planning stage, moving on to executing and controlling and finally closure with follow up.

Chapter 3 focuses on facilitating a meeting and points out the fact that effective meeting facilitation is both a science (using tools and processes) and an art (understanding people). Chapter 4 wraps up the book's first half with details on the skills that a business analyst can use to enhance their effectiveness, termed the "facilitation toolkit".

Chapters 5 through 8 take four types of meetings through the meeting process identified in Chapter 2, define, plan, execute and close. These meetings are specifically targeted for the development of business requirements. Each chapter is similarly designed and concludes with an extensive agenda in chart format. The agenda's headings are Topic, Presenter, Allotted Time, Facilitator Agenda, and Facilitation Tools and Techniques.

Chapter 9 is a brief statement on the business analyst as meeting facilitator, outlining how to acquire skills, how to choose a business analyst for your project team and concludes with what a facilitator is not - the subject matter expert or technical lead.

As mentioned before, Chapters 1 through 4 were the most powerful in the book and contain the majority of key points I will take away from this reading. In my role as a project manager, I am a decision maker and a type-A personality. As such, my typical approach to meetings is to invite everyone on the project team to join a conference call, briefly tell them what the decision needs to be and close off over objections that I have tried to drown out.

Highlights: What I liked!

Obviously, I truly have fallen into some bad behaviors and imagine others have as well. However, key points of this book should guide me away from the bad and towards the good:

- Avoid confrontation, eliminate defensiveness and allow decision-making to proceed as a methodical process

- Include the appropriate people with the needed authority (If you are fact finding, invite the subject matter experts; if you are making the final decision, invite the decision makers.)
- Establish early what is to be accomplished as this impacts what meeting inputs are required, the invitation list and meeting outputs
- Encourage collaboration which fosters personal ownership in implementing the meeting decision

Shortfalls: What was Missing!

There were only two shortcomings noticed in this book; only one of which is material. First, my personal preference would be to expand the Table of Contents to include references on each chapter's Figures and Tables. This would be helpful once the book goes into the bookcase as a quick reference guide - to be able to open up to the TOC and readily move to a specific table versus thumbing through pages trying to recall where the desired information is located.

The material item is Chapter 9, "Closing Comments". The title is certainly appropriate as these are brief comments closing out the book; however, this is not a true chapter that does justice to the book's entire content. I believe a broader view of what this book has accomplished is warranted. This does not detract from the book's content but does miss the opportunity to pull everything together.

Conclusion

Although the majority of working professionals have certainly been to countless training sessions and seminars on conducting meetings, effective listening, and good communication skills, it is always easy to fall into bad practices if we are not continually reminded about what makes for a powerful and effective meeting.

This book can easily be used as a reference document to come back to time-and-time again not only to reinforce good practices but also to highlight bad behaviors one may fall into. This book should prove valuable to anyone facilitating or attending a meeting which is just about everyone in the working world.

I have several takeaways from this reading, the most important being to allow a meeting's decision process to go forward with full team consensus. Each time I try to force a project team into a predetermined decision, I will pause, remember this book and adjust the meeting to be more collaborative. This quick read is powerful which will lead to more powerful meetings in my future.

About the Reviewer:



Marci Cameron



Marci Cameron is a project management practitioner with an MBA from Amberton University in Texas (1994) and a MS from the University of Texas at Dallas (1999) with an emphasis on project management. She has worked in the telecommunications industry for 25+ years in engineering, operations and project management. Ms. Cameron can be contacted at marcicam@nortel.com.