



Civic Reinventions, Inc.

Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation

THE ART OF FACILITATING MULTILINGUAL MEETINGS

BY MARK K. SMUTNY

Whether you work in a global corporation, live in a neighborhood where people speak many languages, or lead a nonprofit or public sector organization, meetings that accommodate multiple languages are increasingly in demand. Immigration, ease of travel, and economic globalization call for skilled multilingual facilitators. With the techniques outlined in this article, you can make your next meeting a mosaic of different languages and cultures.

The goal of inclusion grows complicated in multilingual meetings. Facilitating them is challenging, even difficult. Some organizations have the resources to hire translators, translating equipment, and software that translates in real time. Other organizations with fewer resources can still hold meetings with up to three languages. This chapter addresses how to make bi-lingual and tri-lingual meetings inclusive and effective.

When planning and facilitating multilingual events, facilitators need to be able to speak all the languages or invite bi- or tri-lingual co-facilitators and translators. The planning team must be represented by all language groups. Plans made by one language tradition and imposed on others will not be received well. They just won't work. Equitable meetings begin with equitable planning.

Invitations should be written in all languages spoken at the upcoming event. Invitations can have all the languages in the same document, or each language group can receive its own invitation in its language. Agendas, emails, flyers, hand-outs, and PowerPoint presentations must also be translated into multiple languages. Brevity is essential when more than one language is involved because each statement needs to be repeated in every language.

At the event the welcome, handouts, and presentations should be multilingual. If the group is overwhelmingly of one language, not everything needs to be spoken in all languages. The smaller language groups will still need bi-lingual translators. Contemporaneous translating in which translators speak into a radio headset and participants listen on earpieces is an alternative under these circumstances.

This type of device can easily be rented. Some municipalities, schools and congregations own such systems and make them available to outside groups.

Ground rules are especially important when facilitating meetings in which multiple languages are present. They encourage empathy, recognize differences in communication styles across cultures, and prescribe steps to help meetings be welcoming and inclusive. Mutual Invitation or a talking stick can be helpful in multilingual groups numbering less than twelve. Talking sticks simply take too long if the group is larger than that. If possible, break the group into smaller circles in which you can use talking sticks. This helps you benefit from the rich diversity of attendees.

World Café and other whole group planning methods described in my book **THRIVE: The Professional Facilitator's Guide to Radically Inclusive Meetings** work well with multilingual groups. All include small groups of four or five and plenary sessions in which the insights and ideas of all are reported and recorded. When using these methods, cluster people in language-specific groups. For example, in a tri-lingual gathering, have tables specifically for English speakers, Spanish speakers, and Mandarin speakers.

Dividing participants into language-specific small groups accomplishes several goals. First, conversation flows more easily without having to wait for translation. Second, trust is strengthened. Participants understand each other's nuances and inflections. Some cultures, particularly new immigrant communities, feel safer when conversing with people who speak their language. They often feel intimidated in groups dominated by participants of the majority culture—even when the majority culture folks do not intend to be intimidating. Safety generates trust. Third, language-specific groups have greater confidence when it is time to report in the plenary sessions.

You might think of language-specific groups as caucuses. Caucuses are where people discuss needs, plan strategies, and gain confidence. When caucuses present their demands

and ideas in, or negotiate with, a larger group, the time spent in small groups pays off. People representing less-dominant cultures speak more forthrightly than they would have otherwise. Linguistic groups with less power feel more confident.

A common mistake of well-meaning planners is to have all cultures and languages together in a Kumbaya moment. The reason this rarely works is that different cultures and language groups have different amounts of power. In the United States, for example, English speaking groups have more power than Spanish speakers, Korean speakers, or almost any other linguistic tradition. While there are times when it is important to mix people together in a wonderful tapestry of colors, eye shapes, and backgrounds, it needs to be done with care and intentionality.

The problem is power. Power differentials block full participation unless intentionally addressed in the group process and structure. The well-meaning dominant group will wonder why the other cultures are quiet. They do not realize that some cultures will not address conflicts directly. These cultures articulate disagreements in oblique ways, if at all. For them, preserving outward harmony is more important than speaking or reaching agreement. Silence can have many meanings, from total agreement to complete opposition.

Designing meetings with language caucuses helps break down these power differentials. Later, when caucuses join the plenary session in which all languages are represented, speakers from less dominant groups are more assertive and less likely to suppress their ideas and thoughts. Because comments are made on behalf of the group, no one loses face. Caucuses build confidence and make for more inclusive outcomes.

When you need to mix two or more languages participating in a small group, try to include some people who are bi-lingual. They are an important resource because they can translate for the group. If you have a tri-lingual group, people who speak all three languages are an amazing asset. Identify these people ahead of time. They can be recruited and briefed on the topic and format for the meeting.

Multilingual meetings are challenging and exciting. They are not easy to facilitate. Skilled multilingual facilitators can seem as rare as a kimchi taco truck in Southern Italy. There may not be much market for those tacos, but there is a growing market for skilled facilitators of multilingual meetings.

Copyright © 2019 Mark Smutny and Civic Reinventions, Inc. (www.civicreinventions.com).

All rights reserved. For permission to distribute copies of this article in any form, contact: mark.smutny@civicreinventions.com.