

Shark Bite Meetings for Creative Program Planning

Abstract

The strength of Cooperative Extension lies in the breadth of knowledge and experience of its faculty and staff. Yet those working in Extension can get so bogged down by the weight of this knowledge and become so focused on details, ownership, and process that it can be hard to respond to emerging needs or work effectively as a group. "Shark bite" meetings limit the time demands typically associated with face-to-face, agenda-based meetings while maximizing the creativity and involvement of collaborating participants. Adding structure to fast-paced, collaborative, program-centered meetings allows participants to efficiently brainstorm, consider workload and program fit, and assign roles and outcomes, working toward the ultimate goal of building innovative programs that address emergent issues.

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Introduction

The strength of Cooperative Extension lies in the breadth of knowledge and experience of its faculty and staff. Yet those working in Extension can get so bogged down by the weight of this knowledge and become so focused on details, ownership, and process that it can be hard to respond to emerging needs or work effectively as a group. We acknowledge that there are times when careful planning and measured response are necessary; however, we challenge our peers to consider keeping it simple when collaborating on the development of projects and programs by using our "shark bite" meeting strategy.

Facilitating Shark Bite Meetings

Shark bite meetings limit time demands typically associated with face-to-face meetings while maximizing the creativity and involvement of participants. They involve adding structure to fast-paced, collaborative, program-centered meetings, which helps keep the discussion on track. There are four phases to a shark bite meeting:

- topic introduction,
- creative attack,
- walking away, and

trimming the fat.

Topic Introduction

The facilitator introduces the topic that is to be discussed. The facilitator serves as the lead on the program and has already committed to seeing its completion. Use of a facilitator in Extension working groups has been shown to more effectively maintain a collaborative working environment (Cyr, 2008; Rilla, Paterson, Manton, & Day, 2006). Topic introductions are brief, no more than 30 sec. It is important to touch on the basic program idea as well as funding requirements and any constraints that must be accommodated. Adhering to these controls ensures that funding and program needs are met without allowing program goals to drift based on participant input.

Creative Attack

After the introduction, the facilitator opens the discussion to the larger group. Everyone can share ideas that would supplement or add to the overall program, and even the most farfetched ideas should be shared. Naysaying and striking down another's idea are not permitted; this step is dedicated to building up and gathering all ideas. Fine-tuning takes place during the trimming the fat phase of shark bite meetings. Participants sharing ideas are not committing to be a part of the program even if their ideas remain in the final program plan. If this phase is done correctly, the speed at which the program ideas build and are bounced around simulates a feeding frenzy, hence the name shark bite. Creative attacks should take no more than 5 min. The facilitator records all the ideas and attempts to group them with other associated ideas. This allows participants to follow their streams of consciousness without having to worry about documenting shared ideas. At the end of the creative attack and in preparation for the next step, participants write down their ideas and how those ideas would tie into the program or project as a whole.

Walking Away

After all ideas are shared or the time expires, the group breaks without reaching conclusion or consensus. Everyone walks away to let ideas bounce around their minds for a few days or so. This break gives participants an opportunity to check available resources, curricula, grants, supplies, or volunteer interest prior to formally committing to a project. Also, it allows professionals to evaluate whether the scope of work considered fits in their individual work objectives and schedules.

Trimming the Fat

The group meets again within a week to finalize the program and come to a consensus. At this point, the facilitator reintroduces the topic and shares the documentation of the creative attack with the group. As the discussion opens, participants share ideas that they know will work (on the basis of research done during the walking away phase) and that they are willing to implement. In this way, the scope of the program is immediately narrowed, and potential collaborators who are uninterested or unavailable for a new initiative can bow out. The remaining professionals constitute the work group, and the remaining ideas define the scope of work to be implemented.

Impact

This meeting method has been used locally in the Ocean County (New Jersey) Extension office for collaboration between 4-H and environmental and resource management agents as well as at the state level within a 4-H work group. The use of the shark bite meeting strategy in lieu of regular agenda-based program meetings has had the following effects:

- less time attending program meetings,
- less time pursuing program ideas that would not have worked,
- more time to research ideas before committing to work on a project,
- more inclusive program planning,
- less negativity and naysaying in meetings, and
- faster turnaround to program implementation.

With inclusion of so many creative ideas, there is no limit to the possible outcomes after shark bite meetings. In the past year, we have used these meetings to

- apply for and receive three grants,
- develop and implement strategic planning objectives,
- develop three new county-wide initiatives that served over 200 people, and
- write two journal articles.

Shark bite meetings work best when small groups of participants are meeting. Larger groups can be difficult for the facilitator to manage and, therefore, slow down the process. In an environment in which time is so valuable to Extension professionals and the communities served by Extension, this method has proved to be both efficient and effective in the implementation of collaborative programs, the procurement of grants, and the completion of published articles.

Conclusion

Shark bite meetings add structure to fast-paced, collaborative, program-centered meetings. These effective short meetings allow collaborators to brainstorm (creative attack), consider workload and program fit (walk away), and assign roles and outcomes (trim the fat). Building programs in this manner saves time and allows for innovative programs that address emergent issues.

References

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