

Contributing to a Productive Group Discussion

Unlike some professional meetings you may attend, "The Subject is Change: Creating a Vision for the Future Education of Speech-Language Pathologists," depends for its success largely on participants' contributions to the discussions that represent its focus. What follow are some approaches you may find helpful as a participant in small group discussions. There follow three strategies you might find useful in enhancing their productivity.

Effective group discussants typically

- ♦ consider carefully the issue(s) at hand and speak thoughtfully and directly to them.
- ♦ attend carefully to the points others are making and signal their attentiveness through their posture and by sustaining eye contact.
- ♦ ask questions when points made by others are not clear.
- ♦ draw others into the discussion, especially when they are aware that others may have perspectives that would benefit the group.
- ♦ discourage any inappropriate behavior or uncivil language by giving no attention to minor offenses and by assisting the facilitator in responding to major ones.
- ♦ support the facilitator by understanding her or his role: to manage the discussion to the benefit of the group, not to contribute to its content. However, if you happen to know that the facilitator has a perspective that might benefit the group, you may want to ask that she or he share it.
- ♦ track the major areas of consensus by taking brief notes.
- ♦ contribute to the closing by suggesting areas of consensus and synthesis and possible follow-up actions.

Effective group discussants also understand that concerns may arise in the course of the discussion, and they are aware of possible responses to them.

THE CONCERN: You prefer plenary sessions, where you can learn from an authority, to group discussions, which in your experience have not used your time well.

A RESPONSE: *You should find that the group discussions have been carefully planned to draw on your experience in productive ways and to use your time well. However, the effectiveness of such discussions depends in part on you. By taking an active and constructive role, you can enhance your experience and that of your colleagues.*

THE CONCERN: A member of the group begins to take over the discussion.

A RESPONSE: *The facilitator may find it difficult to resist a persistent contributor. You are likely to know far better whether an individual's contribution is helpful or simply overbearing. If you feel the discussion has reached a point of diminishing returns, you might consider taking a more active part yourself, perhaps complimenting the persistent contributor before turning the discussion in a more productive direction. If the persistent contributor then attempts to engage you directly in a point-counter-point, make it clear that you are directing your remarks to the facilitator and that you support her or his leadership.*

THE CONCERN: You (or some other member of your group) have an interest in discussing an issue of clear importance to the profession that is not part of the formal agenda.

A RESPONSE: *Because the priorities of the different sessions and discussions have been very carefully planned by the organizing committee, an attempt to introduce some other topic, however important, may hinder the group from completing its agenda. You may want to raise such issues in informal settings instead.*

