

Getting Your Partners To Follow-Through

by Patrick J. McKenna

How do you ensure task completion when important projects need to get implemented, when partners seem to agree to participate, but when you are not really certain that you are going to get committed follow through?

Whether it is in a practice group setting, around the table with the members of your Strategic Planning Committee or wherever you happened to be working with your fellow partners, this seems to be one of the most common challenges. That said, there are seven important steps you can take to ensure results (in most cases):

1. Ensure that the undertaking is voluntary.

Far too often the group leader (in their wisdom) thinks that George is the best person to do a given task and publicly arm-twists (or subtly embarrasses) George into taking on that task. Now ask yourself: just how motivated is George really going to be with an assignment that was delegated to him under those circumstances? Even worse, I often see those instances where one particular committee member was absent from a meeting and the others debated about what project “to stick Jennifer with responsibility for.” Now, once again, should we really be surprised when people don’t follow through? Keep in mind that when someone voluntarily takes on a task they are far more committed to ensure the completion of that project. Your role as the leader is to seek out voluntary undertakings from each of your fellow partners, even though you might strongly feel that someone else is better equipped to do a specific project.

2. Where possible, break the endeavor into smaller steps.

Some of the tasks that need to get done may be fairly huge in that to complete the total undertaking will take more than two or three hours of some partner’s time. When that happens get the partners to break the task down into its logical and sequential phases and estimate a time-frame for doing each phase. Even if you think you know how long each step should take, you want buy-in from the individual doing the work. Then when someone is taking on this task we can examine which steps of the task to start with and ensure that they are not setting themselves up to fail.

3. Ask each partner, specifically, what he or she will deliver back to your next meeting.

It is quite conceivable that even an enthusiastic partner might go off and tackle some project only to ultimately deliver a result that was not anywhere near what everyone in the group was anticipating. Therefore, it is helpful for everyone to think about any particular task in terms of the desired outcome or deliverable - what they expect to bring back to the next meeting – whether it is simply a written report or evidence of what action was undertaken. Ideally it is something tangible to show that progress has been made. As the leader, you need to ask each partner to briefly summarize (for the group) what they understand the work is that needs to be done, how they might approach the task, and whether they foresee needing help from anyone else in the group. Doing this will put them in the right mindset

to owning the task and ensure that both they and you understand exactly what the outcome or deliverable will be. You might say something like, “I want to ensure you and I both understand how this will unfold. Could you describe to me what you will do and when?”

4. Ask for a personal commitment.

When you have finally determined the parameters or scope of the undertaking, you then need to look your partner in the eye and say, “Now George, you understand that what is required here should take about three hours to accomplish. Given your current and anticipated client obligations, are you comfortable that you can invest three hours and deliver your report for our next meeting?” When people give their word, especially in front of their peers, that generates an even deeper level of personal commitment.

5. Determine an acceptable completion deadline.

Ideally you want to have tasks accomplished before your next meeting such that any status reports might be circulated to everyone to review ahead of time and not waste the time of everyone at the meeting. For some strange reason, I’ve noticed that we often will pick a Friday as our deadline. Where possible, a Monday may make for a better deadline as most people don’t really jump on their individual project until the last minute anyway; and a Monday often allows the weekend for more reflective thought.

6. Produce a written summary of the commitment.

When working through the various tasks that need to be undertaken during a meeting, it is advisable to write them all down – on either a whiteboard or paper flip chart – for all to see who is going to do what and by when. To help people remember their individual commitment, you can then transcribe those flip chart sheets into meeting minutes and circulate (within 24 hours) to all attendees. Most organized people agree that there is something about the physical act of writing down a commitment that makes it easier to remember and more likely to be acted on.

7. Follow-up with each partner one-on-one.

One of the most valuable ways in which you can spend your leadership time is following up with your partners, between meetings – to *offer your help* in ensuring that they complete their task. You know that your star performers don't need to be managed. They absolutely do what they say they will do, which means being really careful about what they say they will do. Others in your group may well need someone with the patience to prod them a bit and offer their assistance, so that best intentions actually do get implemented.

Finally, carefully manage your (leadership) time.

If you accept the proposition that your work is infinite and time is finite, you realize you have to manage your time and not your work. You need a laserlike focus on doing first things first. And that means having a ferocious understanding of what you are not going to do. The question used to be which phone call you wouldn't take. Now, it's the discipline not to have your e-mail on. The skill is in knowing how to sift through the blizzard of information that hits you all the time. That's a different skill from what you may have needed 10 years ago, but the fundamental principles don't change.