

# Effective Meeting Participation for Family Advisors

## Helpful Ways to Begin: Observing, Listening and then Communicating

As a family advisor, you will bring valuable information and ideas to a discussion. Listening well, asking thoughtful questions and being mindful of how you communicate will go a long way to insuring that your input is well received and on target.

Some tips for effective meeting participation include:

### Prior to the start of the meeting, get the lay of the land

- Pay attention to the culture and style of the meeting
- Be certain you understand the focus of the meeting
- Make sure you are clear what you are being asked to comment on

### Ask good questions

- Ask clarifying questions (*example: "Let me make sure I understand correctly, are you saying...?"*)
- Ask for jargon to be defined (*example: "I'm not sure I know what CSHCN means. Would you please explain it to me?"*)
- Ask for more details (*example: "Can you walk me through this so I can imagine it?"*)

### Think before you speak

Psychology Ph.D. John Gottman says, "How you enter a conversation can be fateful". He describes "soft start-ups" as an effective way to increase your chances of really being heard by others.

Examples of "soft start-up" used successfully by family advisors include:

- I appreciate you're...
- I'm grateful that you...
- We've found...
- From my/our experience...
- For me/us...  
Just so I'm clear on this,  
you want our opinion on...
- In other words...
- My initial reaction is...
- For me/us it would be helpful if...
- Something I might consider...
- The first idea I had was...
- I see it differently...
- I find myself resistant to the idea that...

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## Ready to Speak Up: Different Ways to Participate and Give Input

There are many different ways to give constructive input as a family advisor in a meeting. We've listed four levels of participation below:

### Level 1: Support and Affirm

This is the most basic level of participation and input. It is an easy way to enter into a discussion and establish rapport. Be sure to stay sincere and genuine. Examples of giving support and affirmation include "I appreciate...", "Thank you for...", or "We value what you do".

### Level 2: Offer Feedback

This level of participation provides a chance for you to share your personal perspective on a situation or event. Some tips to successfully offering feedback include:

- Build on positive experiences whenever possible. *For example: "We found things worked well when..."*
- Be clear on whom you represent by pointing out that this is your story and not the story of all families and protecting others privacy.
- Lead in with soft start-ups. *For example: "For me..." or "I find it makes a difference when..."*
- Share a personal story in 30-seconds or less to help bring your feedback alive. Refer to next page as an example.
- If you are giving negative feedback, be specific and try to offer a potential solution. *For example: "What might have helped in that situation is..."*

### Level 3: Offer Suggestions, Ideas and Potential Solutions

A step beyond sharing your perspective is to offer suggestions, ideas, and potential solutions. For example: "Have you considered...", "You might want to think about...", or "What would have been great for us is..."

### Level 4: Express Differing Viewpoints

One of the more challenging ways of participating may be to express a different viewpoint. Your candid opinion can lead to greater understanding so tell yourself, "This is good. This is why I'm here". Be sure to stay grounded and be respectful and describe your point of view in terms of your perception or opinion rather than a matter of fact or truth for all families. For example "I see it differently", "I have a different priority", or "That doesn't work so well for us".

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## Telling Your Story in 30 Seconds or Less

Sharing personal experiences can be a very effective way to make your point. Stories work because they're personal and their images stick with people in ways that abstract ideas or data don't. Unlike a formal presentation, when you tell a personal story in a meeting, it must by necessity be brief. The temptation can be to include too many details because all of it really matters to you. In reality, if you offer too much detail, you will lose your listener. One very effective way to make your point is to bundle it in a 30-second anecdote.

Here are tips to creating an effective 30-second story:

1. Set the stage in the listener's mind's eye by giving just enough details to help paint the picture.
2. Tell what happened that illuminates your point.
3. Share what impact it had.
4. Some stories don't need the point to be explained. Others might.

When it comes to sharing personal stories in a meeting setting, less is more. Here's a 30-second anecdote one parent used to describe a positive experience with a doctor — in response to the question, "What matters to kids and their parents?"

*We came in for a routine check-back appointment. The doctor greeted me with a handshake, turned to my 13 year old and began talking. He never turned back to me that whole appointment. It was all between my son and the doctor. When we left the office, my son turned to me and said, "You know, Mom, I think that's the best doctor's appointment I've ever had." I agreed.*

- parent of a teen with special needs

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## What Happens if You Have a Strong Emotional Response to the Discussion?

Family advising can tap into experiences that have been profoundly personal. A seemingly simple discussion may bring back memories that trigger a wave of strong emotion. Some describe this as being “flooded.”

Research tells us that when emotions set off this kind of strong reaction in your body, it is difficult to listen well and think clearly, let alone problem-solve creatively.

Ways to calm down and re-center yourself when you become flooded include:

- Begin by noticing it and naming it in your mind (*example: “This is interesting. I’m having a strong reaction to this topic”*).
- Remind yourself that this is common to the family advisor role.
- Be aware that your strong response indicates something about how important this issue is for you.
- Take a few deep, slow breathes. This kind of breathing assists in slowing down your heart rate and can be very grounding and calming.
- Sit back in your chair and just listen for awhile.
- Take notes.
- Stay present.
- Focus on the conversation.
- Speak up when you feel ready.