

HIDDEN AGENDAS:

Wish we were talking about the *real* issues.



The Challenge

- The goal of the meeting and the stated agenda items do not represent the real issues facing the group.
- A major issue that is central to the discussion is being avoided.
- Group members assume they have decision-making powers that they actually do not have.
- A group member unexpectedly puts a topic on the table that was not on the agenda.
- During breaks, or in side conversations, people are overheard saying that the wrong items are on the agenda.

What's Really Going On

- The hidden issue may be seen as too sensitive for an open discussion.
- Group members may lack the trust or skills they need to deal with sensitive issues.
- Leaders may not trust the group to be involved in discussing certain topics.
- The item under discussion may already have been decided and the meeting is a pretense.



Facilitator Pitfalls

- Failing to conduct one-on-one interviews before the meeting to identify hidden issues.
- Failing to determine the decision-making authority of the group regarding specific issues.
- Surfacing a sensitive agenda topic without first checking the readiness of group members to deal with it.
- Failing to create a safe environment for confronting sensitive issues.

Intervention Strategies

- Conduct one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders to uncover sensitive or hidden issues.
- Clarify with leadership which items are within the control of the group and which are outside of their control.
- Clarify the specific empowerment levels associated with each agenda item to determine if, in each case, the group is:
 - Being told an outcome
 - Being consulted for ideas (input) on a matter to be decided elsewhere
 - Being asked to discuss a matter and make detailed recommendations that require approval from others
 - Making a decision
- Begin the meeting by posting a summary of the operating assumptions and asking which are correct, incorrect or missing.
- If no one is willing to speak up to identify the hidden agenda, create a survey that people can complete anonymously at a midpoint in the meeting:

Please indicate to what extent. . . .

 1. We're making meaningful progress. (1-definitely not to 4 – definitely are)
 2. We're dealing with the right issues. (1-definitely not to 4 – definitely are)
 3. We're being honest and open. (1-definitely not to 4 – definitely are)
 4. We're ready and willing to deal with sensitive underlying issues. (1-definitely not to 4 – definitely are)
- If the survey indicates that there are sensitive issues that need to be addressed, help group members identify targeted norms that create a safe climate for discussion by asking: "What assurances, conditions, or rules need to be in place before we can safely and productively discuss this issue?"

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