

Helping Two Groups Reach a Compromise

By Sarah J.F. Braley



EVENT: A one-day workshop for 200 college teachers, held in January in an auditorium and classrooms on an East Coast campus.

PLANNER: Mary Tomlinson, president, Orlando-based On-Purpose Partners, business consultants and facilitators specializing in workplace issues.

Challenge: A task force at the college had spent two years coming up with a new compensation package for the teachers, getting help from an outside consultant whose experience was in the world of corporate compensation. When the plan was presented to the academics, a hue and cry arose, resulting in a competing proposal drawn up by one of the teachers.

A series of meetings on the two plans held for the teachers turned contentious, with people shouting and stomping out of the room. On-Purpose was given a week to plan a final campuswide workshop with presentations, Q&A sessions and informative breakouts, while limiting the opportunity for the vocal minority to grandstand and send the meeting into a free-for-all.

SOLUTION: Tomlinson structured a tightly controlled day, intent on making sure all the attendees heard and understood both plans and had a chance to voice their opinions.

The morning started with two 30-minute presentations of the proposals, during which no questions were taken. A 15-minute Q&A followed each presentation, but the rules were strict: People had to raise their hands and use one of the two hand-held microphones that were being ferried around the room, and they could only ask one question - no follow-ups were allowed.

Finally, before lunch, a side-by-side comparison of the plans was presented.

"In the afternoon, the group was broken into 12 breakouts; only four discussion topics were set," says Tomlinson, who gave a quick facilitating lesson before the day began to the teachers who would be handling the afternoon sessions. The smaller groups had an hour to work, and all the flip charts held the same starting points, as each breakout group would come back to the auditorium and present their thoughts on the proposals.

"Because the task force members were teachers themselves, they kept getting caught up in the issues," adds Tomlinson. "Bringing in our outside voice helped them step back and listen to what people were saying. I give the college a lot of credit for going through this painful process." In the end, a modified compensation plan using points from both proposals was adopted.