

The Role of a Participant Process Observer

The participant process-observer [PPO] is expected both to be in the conversation and at the same time to watch and listen to the group's dynamic. A process-observer, by contrast, might do the same thing but would not participate in the conversation, staying instead on the sideline until called upon. When called upon to report, PPOs give feedback that is factual and specific. They may notice and point out trends. They comment on the strengths of the group. Their contribution is valuable to both leadership and participants.

The PPO should be given time at some point in the meeting to give feedback. The comments of the PPO are generally not meant for discussion or debate. It is merely feedback for the group. However, the comments can be used as a basis for making changes in the group process.

PPOs should be thoughtful, respectful, but truthful in the feedback to the group. Learning is better facilitated when group members try to learn from the process comments and do not become defensive.

What does a participant process-observer do? Here's what s/he tries to note:

• Time control:

- Is the group staying on task?
- Are issues being over or under-discussed?
- Is the group using its time efficiently and effectively?
- Does the meeting drag?
- Does it start and end on time?

• Air-time:

- Who is speaking more? Who less?
- Does the group encourage reticent members to speak up?
- Do the chatty-charlies and cathy's allow others to get a word in?

• Relevance:

- Does the conversation stay on track?
- Are there sidebar conversations going on?
- How often does interesting but not pertinent information get on to the table?
- Are decisions being made? Are they clear?

• Covenant & Ground-rules:

- Is the group honoring its previously formed statement of "how we want to work together"?
- Are decisions made by consensus or vote? Does everyone know how to form a proper resolution or policy?
- If a member fails to observe the group's process rules, who calls her/him to account?

• Leadership:

- The chair is responsible for presenting the agenda; is there opportunity to modify it?
- Do other members take the lead in presenting motions or defining issues?
- Do members come prepared? Are they engaged in the conversation?
- Are reports timely and relevant?
- Do members volunteer to address follow-up issues?

• Quality:

- What is the tone of the meeting? Is it filled with good feeling? Or irritation? Is it relaxed? Fun? Or, heavy?
- How do members interact: With respect and good will? Do they listen well and speak fairly? Or nastily? With suspicion or distrust?
- Do members work toward a common goal or seem more invested in scoring points or triumphing with their agenda?
- If tension or conflict arises, how is it dealt with?