



EXECUTIVE DIALOGUE

CAPITAL REGION CHAMBER

Executive Dialogue provides a structured and confidential environment for CEOs, presidents and business owners to share best practices and resolve business challenges. Executive Dialogue participants can expect to make better decisions, improve communication skills and build strong relationships with other Executive Dialogue members.

OVERVIEW

Executive Dialogue consists of 12 - 16 peers from non-competing companies representing various types of industries and organizations. The standard meeting lasts 90 minutes, once per month.

Executive Dialogue is not intended as a venue for casual, social conversation or to serve as a networking platform for sales leads / presentations.

To be eligible for an Executive Dialogue, applicants/ participants must be Regional Chamber members at Business Builder level or above and an equity owner in a business with 3 or more employees.

DISCUSSION PROTOCOL

Members speak from experience rather than give advice. Giving advice or telling someone what to do is a matter of opinion. By sharing experience, members end up with information that allows for better decision making. It is key to creating a safe environment where members feel comfortable sharing knowledge and expertise.

Those who suggest a topic for the meeting are asked to summarize the issue in 2-3 minutes. Should other members ask questions for clarification purposes, those questions should be answered as succinctly as possible to maximize time for input from the other members. While other members are sharing their experience on the topic, the one who raised the topic should refrain from responding, rebutting or otherwise taking up time that could better be used for listening to the other members. Repeated failure to sit and listen while others are providing feedback is unproductive for the group as a whole and will result in removal of the individual from the group.

Some helpful hints:

Use the past tense. Say, "Here's what worked for me..." rather than "Here's what you should do..."

Empathize. Try to understand the situation from the presenter's point of view. Remember that no one else has to live with the consequences, and what works for one person will not necessarily work for another.

Ask questions that prevent defensiveness. Try to explain the purpose of your question before asking it. Don't treat the presenter like a defendant.

Share experiences that have both positive and negative outcomes. This boosts your credibility and shows you're able to learn from your mistakes as well as your triumphs.

Listen well. Write your thoughts and questions as they arise. This frees up your mind to listen until it's your turn to speak.

Paraphrase before your respond. Confirm what you think you heard before you reply. This ensures that you respond to what is said, not what you think was said.

PARTICIPANT COMMITMENT

To ensure success of Executive Dialogue each participant must make a commitment to:

- Attend meetings regularly: the strength of Executive Dialogue is contingent on the participation of all members.
- Maintain complete confidentiality: as you share business challenges and experiences, your roundtable will develop unique relationships.
- Follow discussion protocol.
- Have a desire to improve yourself, team members, and the roundtable itself.

Each Executive Dialogue member is responsible for his/her own experience and must take equal responsibility in ensuring the group's success.

Be Proactive. Take the lead in risking and sharing deep personal experiences. Trust is contagious and soon everyone else will follow.

Share your concerns immediately. If anything in the Roundtable bothers you and you do not discuss it, you do yourself and the group a disservice. An example might be that a member repeatedly fails to arrive on time. Make sure that you criticize the behavior, not the person. It is likely that someone else in the group has the same feelings. Raising concerns before they become too serious can prevent their escalation. Share concerns with Facilitator or Chamber management.

CONFIDENTIALITY

For Executive Dialogue to be successful, members must share openly and honestly. To enable this level of communication, members are required to maintain complete confidentiality. Nothing discussed in Executive Dialogue ever leaves the room, including sharing information with partners, co-owners, spouses or significant others. A breach of confidentiality will result in removal from the group and adversely affect future eligibility for the Executive Dialogue program.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Strong attendance is necessary for participation to benefit the individual and group. A minimum attendance of 75% for meetings is required.

Members are expected to arrive on time and participate for the full length of the meeting. In the event of an emergency or unavoidable conflict, members are asked to contact their group facilitator. Due to confidentiality, substitutes are not allowed.

ROLE OF FACILITATOR

A designated member serves as the liaison to the Chamber and facilitates meetings to ensure desired outcomes are achieved. The Chamber recognizes the Facilitators represent a critical link to the success of the Executive Dialogue program. Participants rely on the Facilitator each month to guide meetings in a way that results in a positive and valuable experience for everyone involved. Their commitment and efforts are very much appreciated and are key to the overall success of the program.

BEST PRACTICES & HELPFUL HINTS

Planning:

- Adapt the **Standard Meeting Agenda** to meet the group requirements and stay true to it. Clarify meeting expectations, follow the agenda, and make sure meetings start and end on time.
- Use tent **name cards** to eliminate possible embarrassment with names.

Effective Facilitators:

- Bring focus.
- Take control of the process, guide the group, provide direction.
- Ensure everyone understands the topic at hand each time there is a shift in focus.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Listen carefully, hearing the unspoken as well as the spoken.
- Guide the group to make decisions about how to prioritize the use of time and hold the group accountable for time management as agreed.
- Monitor discussions so that:
 - one person talks at a time,
 - all members are included, and
 - differing ideas are encouraged.

Note: If the facilitator has an important stake in a particular discussion, he/she should ask for someone to temporarily take their facilitator role. This will allow them to get their needs met without taking away from the group's process.

Monthly:

- Provide a reminder of next meeting to each member at least three business days prior to meeting.
- Follow up with absent members – Review importance of attendance and remind them of next meeting.
- Send attendance report to Chamber – email or fax designated staff (within 3 business days of meeting).
- Watch for those who would make good future Facilitators.

Term:

- Suggested term for Facilitators is 12 – 24 months.
- Rotation provides other group members an opportunity to learn by leading other leaders.
- Each leader brings his/her own style, changing the group's dynamics.

SAMPLE MEETING FORMAT

Opening:

One-Word Opener: Members say one word that describes his or her feelings.

OR

The Facilitator asks participants to respond to a question/topic that he/she sent to members ahead of time. Use a time to enforce 3 -5 minute time limits and to keep the meeting on schedule. This also respects the time and preparation of other members.

Confidentiality Reminder: Facilitator reminds members that everything discussed is confidential.

Select Issues for the Day:

- Facilitator leads the process of prioritizing issues and identifies the topic for discussion (up to four issues are selected).

Possible Topics for Executive Dialogue Meetings:

- How to get new business.
- How to improve profitability.
- How to improve service to customers/clients.
- How to motivate employees – to work “smarter.”
- How to control growth without being controlled by it.
- How to avoid “burnout” in the CEO role – or recover from it.
- How to work at cost containment and reduction.
- How to manage cash flow.
- How to recognize and manage natural growth phases.
- How to create a profit-sharing plan.
- How to handle banking relationships.
- How to organize employee training.
- How to write/update a business plan.
- How to bring in a new “partner” or get rid of a current “partner.”
- How to best use a “consultant” (i.e., accountant, fringe benefits, flex plan, etc.)