

The Facilitators

How a local company saves businesses one meeting at a time *By Emily Henagan*

Sit in on a local meeting where oil industry executives are effectively planning this year's goals and setting its agendas and chances are Elise Bouchner, Christina Burton Harper and their Excelerant team members are the ones responsible for creating the meeting environment conducive to success.

Bouchner, Harper and Phyllis Arce-neaux co-founded the company under the moniker The Training Source in 2003. Since then, they have been consulting, training and facilitating meetings for a diverse clientele that runs the gamut of industries from the medical to the oil and gas fields. The name Excelerant, according to Bouchner and Harper, connotes accelerating an already "excellent" business' growth.

"Our job as the facilitator is to deliver the result that the owner — generally the president of the company — of the meeting desires," says Bouchner, managing partner of Excelerant. "We find out what he wants, and we carry it out. Our role is to create the agenda together with him and develop an experience in that meeting that achieves the result. We plan, design and develop the activities of the meeting."

And the ways they plan, design and develop the activities of each meeting are as varied as the customers they serve. Bouchner and Harper maintain they approach each meeting differently than the last one and say there is no formulaic model to planning meetings. "I have never approached a meeting the exact same way that I approached another one," says Bouchner, who is the only Certified Professional Facilitator in Louisiana approved by the International Association of Facilitators.

They do, however, suggest business people follow two steps of advice on Excelerant's website, <http://exexp.com>. The first is to "identify your people and company development priorities" by asking, "What does your company need to do to keep pace with its current growth or stage?" The second encompasses "determining your people and company development priorities" by inquiring, "Which objectives, when satisfied, will have the greatest impact on the achievements of your business goals?"

Bouchner and Harper agree that having an outsider come in to facilitate the meeting is extremely beneficial to a company. "So if you are in the role of the leader of the

meeting, you cannot be a participant," says Bouchner, who received her juris doctorate from Syracuse University. "The facilitator comes in to allow everyone to be a participant."



Elise Bouchner

Christina Harper

"I think that's why having an outside facilitator come in can be so advantageous," adds Harper, an executive coach and managing partner of Excelerant. "A lot of times they [the presidents of the organizations] are the ones who try to lead the meetings, but they're the participants, too. They have a stake in what is going to be created. So if you bring in someone who is an outside, objective facilitator, you as the president can participate like the rest of your team."

Not only do they agree having an outsider come in is vital to running meetings smoothly, but they also concur picking and staging a location properly is paramount to the success of the meetings. "We are location directors," says Harper. "The meeting space is important; it's part of the details in terms of the services that we offer," adds Bouchner. "If we have a meeting of 40 people in a classroom-style setting, then we will rearrange the seating to make it more conducive to discussion."

Harper elaborates that distinguishing the stronger, more vocal participants from the more subdued personalities at the beginning of the meeting helps create an effective meeting. "We are trained to orchestrate these kinds of conversations," says Harper. "We get to see who the strongest personalities are and who the quiet ones are. So, we'll ask specific questions to draw out the quiet ones while still maintaining the respect and the diplomacy of the loud ones. That's some of the things that a trained facilitator can create."

As trained facilitators, Bouchner and Harper also help create their customers' meeting handouts, as well as assisting their clients in incorporating multimedia. Harper

says there are three generations of people in the workforce and the youngest generation generally learns better with multimedia aids. Whether it is through interactive projectors on which participants can write and draw or through PowerPoint presentations that allow employees to adequately follow along with the speaker, Bouchner and Harper say they utilize a wide array of multimedia for meetings they plan and facilitate. According to them, no one medium is superior to another one.

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Bouchner and Harper also stress meeting planners must integrate various types of communication into a meeting. "That are a lot of folks in any industrial business that are very used to being very operationally focused," says Bouchner. "So one of the things that we include as we design the experience for them is we get them moving around; they're having the opportunity to talk. There's not just discussion. There are other methods of communication that are used. We have a lot of tools in our toolbox."

And clients testify Excelerant hold the right tools for their companies. On Excelerant's website, one anonymous healthcare partner client comments Excelerant "was able to accomplish something we had tried for years to do, and couldn't. They (Excelerant's employees) helped us work through healthy conflict and learn how to reach true agreement, not just for the sake of agreeing. Plus, they helped us create a blueprint for our organization... We've been able to widen the leadership circle so we can grow."