

## GROUP OBSERVATION EVALUATION

Sunnyvale City Council Meeting  
12 February 2008

(1) The overall purpose of the meeting was to discuss decisions about developments in the city and policies that foster growth, enrichment, and citizen harmony. The meeting also served as a space for the public to address its concerns regarding various aspects of community life. The meeting was attended by the five city council members, the mayor of the city, city staff including the city clerk and the city attorney, numerous residents of the city, representatives of a few businesses in the city, and some spokespeople for special interest groups, as well as the four members of our group.

(2) The communication climate of the meeting was cordial and inviting in the beginning. Everyone was friendly and addressed each other politely. It was as if everyone present was set on the same goal of getting through the evening. But prior to the recess, the climate became tense and apprehensive. This was because an important issue was being discussed. The majority of the audience consisted of Sunnyvale residents that were fervently opposed to the passing of a measure that could detrimentally impact the quality of life in their neighborhood. Some residents spoke in a rather defensive fashion, reflecting a popular belief that the measure would pass regardless of their protests. A few did not use opening and closing pleasantries when it was their turn to speak. Whereas there were maybe a dozen or more speakers that opposed the proposition, only two audience members spoke in favor of it. In the end, the Council voted 4-3 in favor of the minority.

(3) Different roles were evident during the meeting, including task, maintenance, and self-centered roles.

In terms of task, the council members, the mayor, and city staff performed this role. The mayor himself led and facilitated the meeting. He announced the beginning and ending of discussions, called on council members, city staff, and members of the public to speak, made it clear when it was time for council members to vote, and clarified and enforced meeting norms. Different council members served as opinion givers and elaborators, and the vice mayor in particular manifested coordinator tendencies. The city clerk functioned as a procedural technician and possibly as a recorder as well. The city attorney seemed to serve the role of information giver. And we feel compelled to mention that one council member in particular stood out as an information and opinion seeker.

In terms of maintenance, we only saw the mayor fulfilling this role. Even amidst mounting antagonism, he was able to help keep the meeting going relatively smoothly, allowing everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard within their allotted time frame. In this sense, he acted as an encourager and gatekeeper. It was an excellent idea for him to call a recess after a majority of the audience became somewhat upset and disappointed at the result of the council's recent vote. It gave some people a chance to vent and express their disappointment to each other. It also enabled one council member to approach our group and comment on the difficulty of such situations.

In terms of self-centered roles, most of the audience members seemed to have been focused on their own agendas. There were also some members of different city departments present to press their preference for city-wide decisions.

In our opinion, a positive difference could have been made if there were more members of the council and the city staff that served the maintenance role, particularly that of harmonizer and compromiser and especially of encourager.

(4) Non-verbal communication played a maintenance role in the meeting. It effectively served to reinforce the leadership and authority of the mayor as well as his function in facilitating the meeting.

First, the room was set up in such a way as to position the mayor in the middle or spotlight position. The council chambers had a theater-like arrangement: a central walkway dividing audience seats into left and right arrangements that cascaded down toward a raised platform or stage, if you will, whereupon the council members sat in an arc-like fashion, with the mayor, as mentioned earlier, in the middle. The podium, facing the council members, designated the boundary between public seating and city staff seating. The city staff had seats perpendicular to those of the audience and those of the council members which made it seemingly awkward for city staff to make and maintain eye contact with certain members of the audience and the council. This arrangement of city staff seating is believed to address a notion of confidentiality, since a parallel orientation of seating would allow either the public or the council members to see the laptop screens of the city staff.

Next, council members used lights to indicate a desire to speak or ask a question. This is similar to how students customarily raise their hands to be recognized. The mayor had a monitoring device to know which members wanted to contribute. The mayor had to verbally recognize a speaker, be they council member, city staff, or member of the public, before the speaker was allowed to speak.

Lastly, being centrally located allowed the mayor ample occasion to make eye contact with speakers. In fact, it was often the case that speakers made eye contact with the mayor or members of the council from the podium with the exception of those speakers who read from prepared documents. Audience members were allowed to see the faces of speakers via the position of two television monitors that flanked both sides of the chamber, broadcasting recognized speakers. These same monitors also presented the results of the council's votes.

(5) Issues around listening or language that stood out for us included the use of formal speech and what looked like poor listening.

We were rather impressed with the formality of exchanges. For the most part, speakers were polite, attending to common conversational pleasantries, and frequently referring to council members by their title, e.g. Mr. Mayor and Council Member X. Citizens identified themselves with their first and last names and the address of their residence.

We were somewhat dismayed that there was not a lot of paraphrasing going on. It was as if one person would speak and then there might be a comment or two about what was said before moving on to the next speaker. We also observed what seemed like judging and rehearsing behavior among some of the council members and believe that this played a key part in the deterioration of the communication climate mentioned above in (2).

Also, we were disappointed at the insensitivity the mayor displayed when he could not properly pronounce the names of some of the residents. The mayor seemed too quick to dismiss effort and replace it with humor.

(6) We left the meeting fairly convinced that there was a hidden agenda of some kind at play. The council seemed removed in a sense from truly attending to the voice of its citizenry. As conflict is defined as a struggle among group members who perceive incompatible goals, ideas, and values, we are certain of conflict. We believe that the council sees business development as the primary and viable means of fostering growth and enrichment of the city, which in turn could contribute to citizen harmony by means of augmenting and expanding public resources for services and recreation.

(7) Based on only two hours of observation, we are concluding that yes, in terms of the overall purpose of the meeting, and despite some misgivings about a particular issue, the meeting was effective. Decisions were discussed and made for city improvement. Additionally, issues were raised and addressed to hopefully inspire greater initiative in recognizing, if not realistically defining, how to accomplish citizen harmony.

(8) For the meeting to have been even more effective, we thought of three communication ideas or practices that the council as a whole could have used. First, we think that eliminating the notion of an attitude of we-versus-them would greatly increase the likelihood of public collaboration and thus enable citizen harmony. This can be accomplished by fostering cohesiveness. We recommend overt recognition of past successful outcomes when the council and the public cooperated on a project or proposal. We also suggest reiterating goals of city improvement and growth and presenting projects and proposal that could potentially arouse citizen concerns within a framing bias.

Next, we believe that active listening would enable the council to better negotiate competition between business growth and citizen harmony. Without a doubt, it seems that the council is in favor of the interests of the businesses residing within the city limits than it is with the concerns of its citizens. Again, we suggest less judging and less rehearsing and more paraphrasing of what citizens say.

Lastly, we think that a positive climate could have helped make the meeting more effective. As it turned out, we did not feel that the council did a good job of validating those residents of the city that were present. For that matter, it even seemed as if residents left the meeting with the sense of not being worthwhile contributors to the improvement and success of their city. A greater frequency of confirming responses from the council especially endorsement can help bring about a positive climate and thus contribute to a more effective meeting.