

Parking Lot

One of the most effective tools a group can use to keep a meeting on track is a parking lot. A parking lot is a place where issues that are important but not relevant to the topic at hand can be parked out of the congestion of discussion. Issues can be brought back in to the discussion, when appropriate, or reviewed at a later time. A parking lot serves as a visual reminder that each idea is important and will not be lost or ignored.

At the beginning of a session:

Post a blank piece of chart paper on the wall and write “Parking Lot” across the top. Place the parking lot near a room exit. This will serve as a reminder and allow people to post any off-topic thoughts they might have as they go on break. During the session warmup, possibly during or just after a discussion of ground rules, discuss the concept of a parking lot and how to use it.

During a session:

If the group strays from the agenda, ask the group if they would like to spend more time discussing the issue or place in the parking lot. Ask the person who initiated the issue to write it up using one “sticky note” per thought. Ensure that the parking lot is cleared at regular, agreed upon intervals.

At the end of a session:

Meeting discussions are typically not held simply for discussions sake, so follow up is key. Review parking lot items at the end of each session. Like other parking lots, a meeting parking lot can be the last place to focus on before departing and leaving the discussion behind. In this way, the group can ensure that important thoughts are not lost. To review, simply read each item and ask, “Has this issue been addressed or is further discussion and/or follow-up needed?” If the group desires further discussion, coordinate an appropriate time. Get confirmation from the group on the disposition of each item.

IDA Boards

A related concept is to break the parking lot into different parking boards. One tactic is to use three boards labeled “**Issues, Decisions, and Actions**” often referred to as “**IDA**.” The **IDA** method can help groups to effectively convert discussion into action and document meeting outcomes.

- The **Issues** board is like a standard parking lot. It consists of those slightly off topic or extraneous issues that come up during the meeting discussion. The issues list could also contain those issues that are “out of reach” but need attention (these items may be later documented under **Decisions** or **Actions**).
- The **Decisions** board simply documents decisions made by the group during the course of the meeting.
- The **Actions** board is for next steps related to each issue and/or decision.

As with other parking lots, end-of-meeting review is important.

- When reviewing each issue on the list, ask: “Have we covered it?” “Do we need to cover it?” and “When should time be spent covering it?”
- When reviewing the decisions list, the opportunity exists to dig deeper, look at each decision, and ask, “What is the change or benefit of this decision?” Groups might also take time to review and discuss each decision to gauge and set the expectation for follow-through.
- The actions list contains the overall impact of the meeting. In reviewing the actions list, assign specific steps, names, dates, and reporting/follow-up for each item. (See action planning.)