



More Effective Meetings

Adapted from Mike Milstein

Meetings can perform several functions. First, they provide an excellent forum in which members of a group can share information and clarify their preferences. Second, they enable wide input into decisions that might affect the group's members. Third, when decisions are made, meetings help to identify members who have the ability to perform tasks and increase the probability that these persons actually will carry them out. Finally, meetings bring group members together to remind them that they share common values and purposes even though they may have different roles.

Unfortunately, most meetings do not live up to their potential. Organizational members frequently regard meetings as a waste of time and something to be avoided unless absolutely necessary. People often complain that meetings are:

1. Too long
2. Boring
3. Dominated by formal leaders or by a few influential or verbal people
4. Poorly organized and/or poorly led
5. Called too frequently or, just as bad, not frequently enough
6. Subverted by members whose behavior are destructive
7. Not focused on important issues

Most people who attend such meetings leave wondering how they are related to the group's purposes or ongoing activities and thinking that "there must be a better way!" Meetings that come closer to fulfilling their potential functions are guided by basic rules regarding their planning, conduct, and follow-up.

PREPARATION

What actually happens during a meeting is as dependent on careful planning as it is on meeting-management techniques. The following rules can help leaders to avoid some common traps.

1. ***Define the Purpose of the Meeting.*** A clear notion of what is to be accomplished is the foundation on which everything else rests. Not only should the leader have a good idea of what he or she wants to accomplish, but, equally important, the suggestions of the group members should be solicited. This feedback helps to assure that the meeting will focus on relevant issues. It also promotes anticipation, curiosity, and preparation.
2. ***Develop an Agenda.*** Once considerations are identified, they should be sequenced in a formal agenda so that those topics that are most urgent appear at the beginning of the meeting. This increases the likelihood that the most relevant issues actually will be considered.



3. ***Distribute the Agenda Prior to the Meeting.*** Keeping the group members informed about the pending meetings increases their senses of responsibilities and helps them to be aware of the purposes of the meeting. Prepared to attend it and more enthusiastic about participating.
4. ***Work Ahead of the Meeting.*** Meetings are not the time when tasks or projects are worked on since the last time the group met. Rather, it is an opportunity to share updates, gather new input, and make decisions.

CONDUCTING MEETINGS

1. ***Start on time.*** It is very frustrating for members to have to wait for other members before the meeting can begin. Starting on time, even if only a few people are present, sets a precedent and suggests that members should be more punctual. It also rewards those who arrive on time.
2. ***Review the agenda and set priorities.*** Initially, agenda items may need to be removed, combined, reordered, or added (as new business at the end of the agenda). This review provides a check on the planning and gives the group members one more opportunity to take responsibility for the meeting.
3. ***Stick to the agenda.*** A common problem occurs when the leader allows the member to explore new topics before completing the established agenda. Such a discussion is likely to be unsatisfactory because there has been no opportunity for preparation of information and it is likely that other agenda items will not be explored because discussion of the new topic will take up allotted time. This must be balanced with allowing discussion and new ideas to develop on agenda topics. Leaders can minimize this problem by requiring new topic raised at a meeting be put under “new business” and considered after the listed agenda has been completed.
4. ***Assign responsibilities and establish target dates for task accomplishment.*** Decisions that call for tasks to be performed require, either during the meeting or soon thereafter, that members be assigned to carry them out within established time periods. This not only promotes task accomplishments but also provides a clear sign to the group that decisions made at meetings will be pursued.
5. ***Summarize agreements reached.*** Reviewing the outcomes of a meeting reminds group members about the major decisions that were reached and clears up any potential misinterpretations. This activity also provides a sense of completion for the members and increases the potential that members will leave in agreement about what occurred.
6. ***Close the meeting at or before the agreed-on time.*** Leaders who ask group member to stay for “just a few minutes longer” to complete a critical agenda item may be perceived as being insensitive to others. It usually is better to end on time or even a few minutes early. Members will appreciate the leader’s concern about their other commitments. Items that are scheduled for the end of the agendas, except in extraordinary circumstances, can be put off until the next meeting.



7. **Keep a written record.** Clear, complete, and accurate minutes are important because they provide the group and the leader with the ability to recall decisions that were made, actions that were called for, and responsibilities that were assigned. The minutes remind members to get on with their tasks. Equally important, conflicting interpretations of meeting outcomes can be minimized if complete and accurate minutes were available.

FOLLOW UP

Following up is as important as conducting the meeting. It translates decisions made at meetings into tangible results, including the development of policies, the design of new procedures, and the collection of information. If the follow-up is adequate, subsequent meetings will be viewed positively. If the follow-up is not sufficient, subsequent meetings may be anticipated unenthusiastically.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT MEMBERS

If some members of a group behave in ways that are disruptive, participation becomes difficult for others. The leader must learn to deal with the following behaviors:

1. Talking for the sake of being heard
2. Conducting side conversations
3. Challenging attempts to move the group toward decisions
4. Joking about everything that happens
5. Interpreting criticism of ideas as personal attacks
6. Urging the group to take action before a problem is clearly identified
7. Insisting on a precise, clear definition of each idea to the point the group becomes bogged down
8. Bringing up topics that are not germane to the discussion

The following rules can help to improve the leader's ability to deal with difficult members:

1. **Listen, but Do Not Debate.** Troublesome members cannot simply be turned off or tuned out. Although it is difficult, it is best to work at bringing troublesome members into the mainstream discussion. When they feel that their views are respected, such members often begin to accept responsibility for controlling their own behaviors.

2. **Talk Privately with Members Who Continually Exhibits Disruptive Behaviors.** Publicly chastising difficult members can have detrimental effects; they may increase their negative behaviors or withdraw entirely from participation in the group. Public confrontations are best reserved as a last resort. Private discussions in which the leader's concerns are presented and the disruptive member's views are solicited provide confidential opportunities for members as well as leaders to explain their feelings and needs and promote the potential for agreements to be reached. This strategy preserves the members' sense of dignity, spares the rest of the group from witnessing embarrassing confrontations, and conserves precious meeting time. It is important to



remember, during such discussions, that the focus is to be on the members' *disruptive* behaviors, not on the members' overall personalities or past histories.

3. ***Turn Negative Behaviors into Positive Contributions.*** It should not be assumed that all difficult members want to subvert meetings. Some may want to make positive contributions, but have not found the appropriate means to do so. Leaders can help disruptive members to find more productive ways of harnessing their energies to the group's needs. For example, leaders can encourage disruptive members to participate in planning sessions, ask for their suggestions during meetings, and give them the responsibility to perform tasks that results from decisions made in the meetings. Although some may not be responsive to such initiatives, many disruptive individuals, when so approached, become to active and productive members.

4. ***Encourage the Group to Share the Responsibility for Handling Difficult Members.*** If the group members share maintenance activities with the leader, it is more likely that negative behaviors will decrease. Group censure puts pressure on disruptive members to modify their behaviors. It is one thing to risk the wrath of the leader and quite another to risk censure by the entire group.