11 Conducting Effective Meetings

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"90% of success is showing up!"

Woody Allen

OUTLINE

Meetings often seem like the bane of our existence. Most of us wonder how much easier our lives would be if we didn't have to participate in so many. The greater the success professionals achieve in an organization, the more time is spent in meetings. Managers spend more than 50% of the average work week in meetings,[1-3] in addition to the time spent preparing for and performing tasks assigned in a meeting. It sometimes seems as if an endless stream of meetings leaves us no time to catch up on the rest of our work.

This huge expenditure of time would be more acceptable if participants believed meetings were a valuable use of time. However, a poll of 471 management leaders conducted by Communispond reported that 70% of the participants found meetings "a waste of time."[2] A second survey performed by Accountemps found that the average executive spends 2 months each year in *unnecessary* meetings.[4] A third survey by Hofstra University and Harrison Consulting Services revealed that three fourths of business leaders spend more time in meetings now than they did a few years ago and expect to spend even more time in meetings a few years from now.[3]

The impact of a poor meeting is always detrimental. It steals time that could have been devoted to a more valuable effort. So why have meetings?

The fact is most groups and organizations can only function by having meetings. Major decisions affecting our lives are made daily in meetings. Congress approves budgets, an academic committee considers admissions, a jury decides innocence or guilt, a family decides vacation plans. Meetings can be successful.

WHY MEETINGS FAIL

What is the typical response to the question: "Why did this meeting fail?" Most respondents focus on three issues.[5-8]

The chair is disorganized. He or she has no control, establishes no order, is too talkative, unprepared, or does not communicate. The agenda was not followed. The chair's personality creates barriers to effective communication.

The committee members don't participate, are uninterested, unprepared, and don't pull their weight. They don't complete their assignments, show up late, talk during the meeting. There is too much arguing and conflict—one-upmanship by a dominant personality.

The meeting has no purpose. There was no preparation. Members don't know why they were gathered. It starts late and runs overtime. The room is too hot. Members couldn't see visual aids. The meeting was one digression after another.

Sound familiar?

THERE MUST BE A BETTER WAY

Whether you are running the meeting or just trying to survive it, it often seems like there must be a better way. There is. Effective meetings are purposeful, time efficient, focused, and well conducted. This chapter reviews the components of effective meetings with specific attention to:

- Why and why not to have a meeting
- How to prepare for a meeting in advance
- How to conduct a meeting
- Problem-solving techniques
- How to avoid common traps including the most difficult people
- What to do after everyone leaves

To transform a necessary and boring evil and make it into a creative center of communication, you must prepare, run the show without stealing it, and meet your objectives, as well as those of the group.

TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE A MEETING

The first issue to determine is whether the meeting is necessary.

Reasons to Avoid a Meeting

Meetings should be avoided (Box 11-1) or severely limited if they are only ritual. Unfortunately, rituals, like Linus' blanket, are not easily abandoned. Most meetings occur because there is always a meeting about the subject at this time of the day, week, or month.

If the person organizing the meeting is unable to develop a meaningful agenda, then this meeting should be carefully scrutinized for its value and purpose. Give consideration to looking for an alternative method for accomplishing the goal.

It may be unnecessary to have a meeting when there are no decisions to be made. This situation can occur when there is no question to be asked, no problem to be solved, or you already know the answer and don't need permission to accomplish the goal. It may also occur when greater involvement will only confuse the issue, as in "Too many cooks will spoil the broth."

Reasons to Have a Meeting

Meetings are the most efficient way to communicate some types of information and make some types of decisions.[1,2,5,9,10]

Information Transmission. This type of meeting provides a forum for the simultaneous dissemination of issues, not debate. It creates a pool of consistent knowledge. Typical examples include defining and promoting a group's mission, progress reports, educational seminars, and training sessions.

If a prolonged presentation is required, use visual aids to enhance interest. Multisensory communication is best. At the completion of this type of informational presentation, it is essential to check for understanding, reactions, confusion, or clarity.

Problem Solving. Problem-solving meetings are held to identify issues, develop solutions, make determinations, and implement the decision. The premise of a problem-solving meeting is that there is general agreement that a problem exists that members of the group can solve. A group is generally more creative and better at decision making than an equivalent number of individuals working alone.[2]

Group decision making creates commitment to the solution, which results in more effective implementation. If the problem is solvable by a single person, and commitment to the decision is unnecessary, the meeting is also unnecessary.

BOX 11-1

REASONS TO AVOID A MEETING

1. Ritual
2. No information to share
3. No decisions to be made
4. Sharing gossip
5. Showing off
6. Demonstrating power
7. Avoiding work
8. Can inform better by phone
9. Can inform better by email

ESSENTIAL COMMITTEES FOR EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS[11,12] (Box 11-2)

The hospital's staff and administration carry out their business by committee. However, emergency care providers historically have been perceived as shift workers who put in their time and do little else to promote the mission of the institution. By working toward the common good of the institution, emergency physicians can be instrumental in implementing the institution's programs. Emergency physicians can have a voice and a presence that is crucial to recognition as peers. This participation will, over time, provide a broader perspective of the emergency department and its issues.

Members of the Department of Emergency Medicine should have representation on all key committees, including but not limited to those discussed in the following sections.

Executive Committee

Decisions affecting the entire medical staff are made here, and participation as an active voting member is critical. Participation allows you to present emergency department issues for definitive action. If you're not in, you're out.

Disaster Committee

An emergency care provider should chair this committee. Disaster management is composed of prehospital care, triage, rapid assessment, emergency intervention, referral, resource utilization, and communications, all of which are the foundations of modern emergency medicine. This arena is the perfect opportunity for emergency care providers to demonstrate their expertise to the staff and community.

Credentials Committee

This committee is pivotal and active participation may be crucial. This committee is charged with the responsibility of investigating and endorsing physicians for membership to the medical staff. Members of this committee delve into confidential matters. Presence on this committee avoids misunderstandings and promotes fair evaluation of emergency physician candidates.

Emergency Department Management Committee

Placing complete control of the emergency department in the hands of the physician or the nursing director is not always possible, or even desirable. Many directors want to share the

BOX 11-2

ESSENTIAL COMMITTEES

Executive Committee
Disaster Committee
Credentials Committee
Quality Improvement Committee
Emergency Department Management Committee

burden of responsibility with others who have strong interests in the success of the department. An emergency department management committee is an effective and politically expedient solution. The committee members should come from administration, emergency nursing, and the emergency physician group. This committee should provide a forum for consensus development, strategy, and team building.

Quality Management Committee

The emergency department plays a vital role in the provision of quality care in the hospital. Because of the importance and high visibility of the emergency department, the care rendered to emergency patients is scrutinized by the medical staff and administration. Institutional support for the emergency department quality improvement program will occur most easily when an emergency care provider is an active participant on the hospital-wide committee.

PREPARATION

Good meetings are well-orchestrated events (Box 11-3). The first critical element of successful meetings is planning.[11] Planning allows the group to accomplish its objectives smoothly and efficiently. Preparing for a meeting includes developing objectives, creating an agenda, inviting the appropriate people, and preparing the proper room logistics. Less time is spent in meeting when more time is spent preparing for them.

Determine the Purpose

Have you been to, or worse, run a meeting in which part way through you are uncertain about what you are trying to accomplish? Unfortunately, many meetings are poorly organized and seem to exist without purpose. Meetings without clear objectives waste time. When preparing for a meeting, simply ask yourself these questions:

- What do I want to accomplish as a result of this meeting?
- Will accomplishing this goal further the organization's mission?
- Could I effectively accomplish it without a meeting?
- What outcomes would demonstrate that I have successfully accomplished the objectives?

The more clearly the objectives can be stated, the more likely it is they will be accomplished. Establish priorities for the objectives so that the truly important issues receive appropriate attention. Once the objectives are clear, determine the type of meeting that will best accomplish these objectives.

Rule: "Write the minutes before the meeting." In other words, know what you want to accomplish, plan for it, and move things in the proper direction.

Develop an Action Agenda

The agenda is the single most important document required for a successful meeting.[2,5,9] An agenda is a road map, timetable, overview, advertisement, and goal-setter (Box 11-4). It cues the presiding officer, enlists attention of members, and keeps everyone moving in the same direction at the same time. More time spent preparing an agenda generally will require less time in the meeting. The agenda should be complete but accomplishable. If the time runs out before the meeting does, participants will be left with the impression of disorganization and poor prioritization. The agenda should be circulated in advance.

Write the Meeting's Objective. A statement of the meeting's objective will help the members mentally prepare for the discussion.

List Topics. Participants like to know in advance what will happen and what is expected of them. An agenda that is divided into its component parts will help organize and focus the discussion, allowing the chair to redirect a wandering group. It may be helpful to mark items for *information, discussion,* or *decision making* to cue members to the expectations.

Sequence Topics. Provide an orderly framework for the meeting's topics by placing them in a logical sequence. When subjects flow from one to another, it becomes easier to develop support for the issue, and the meeting becomes more manageable. A well-organized approach will facilitate work on key concepts. Some meeting leaders suggest beginning with topics that require more creativity, which also allows adequate time to be spent on the most complex issues. Others recommend an orderly progression of topics beginning with easier, less taxing topics, and proceeding to more difficult and complex issues. This method achieves group cohesiveness by establishing early success. Either approach can be successful, depending on the variables such as the chair's preference and the composition of the specific topic.

Circulate in Advance. Circulating the agenda in advance enables members to come to the meeting prepared. This practice also allows the group members to confirm the time of the meeting and review the topics for discussion. It compels the chair to consider each topic and be prepared. Advance circulation eliminates the most common cause of initial con-

BOX 11-3

MEETING PREPARATION

1. Determine purpose
2. Develop agenda
3. Select participants
4. Set setting
5. Seat for success

BOX 11-4

AGENDA ITEMS

1. Date, start time, end time
2. Location
3. List of individuals invited
4. Objective of meeting
5. List of topics including
   —brief summary
   —time allotted
6. Supporting documents

fusion seen at the beginning of a meeting. It is also a sign of courtesy to those attending the meeting.

Provide Supporting Documents. Supporting documents should be attached and sent early with the agenda so that members may become familiar with the information before the meeting. A requirement to protect confidential information is an exception to this practice.

Action Agenda.[13] Although some items require no further effort, others necessitate specific action by members of the group. Clarifying the steps, assigning specific responsibility, and gaining commitment will substantially increase the tasks that get accomplished.

Who Should Attend

The meeting planner must decide who should attend the meeting.[2,9,10,14,15] The basis of this decision is too often determined by considerations represented by the following statements: "They've always been at the meeting" (a ritual); Let's get a homogeneous group for quick and easy decisions (a rubber stamp); "Let's include everyone (a public relations event)." Inviting individuals who have no reason to be at the meeting is a waste of time and can be disruptive.

The appropriate list of attendees should be based on the need to be there. Relevant considerations for membership include knowledge and potential to contribute, power to make a decision, responsibility to implement a decision, and being affected by the decision (stakeholder analysis).[16]

Large groups (more than 12 to 15) often become ineffective at decision making. Homogeneity (choosing those with a similar perspective) leads to easy and quick decisions that have worked in the past. Few options will be considered and leadership challenges will be rare. A homogeneous group falls prey to "groupthink" and tends to exhibit stereotypic behavior and superfluous decisions.[17]

A more diverse or heterogeneous group will bring more information, alternatives, opinions, and creativity. This group will tend to make slower and more complex decisions. There will be less complacency and a greater drive for innovative solutions.

Set the Setting

Although the perfect meeting environment will not guarantee a successful meeting, an uncomfortable room that is hot, stuffy, noisy, and overly dark will guarantee failure. The following physical characteristics are important to consider.

Room Size. Choose a room that corresponds to the group's size. A small group in a very large room will create separation and distance between individuals.[1,9] Less communication will decrease the attention and focus on the issue, and the group will lose cohesiveness. A very small room with too few seats will quickly get hot, stuffy, and oppressive, squelching meaningful discussion.

Room Aesthetics. Dissention is more likely to occur when people are crowded into an unattractive room for a prolonged period. Poor aesthetics can produce monotony, irritability, fatigue, and hostility. A red room becomes unpleasant over a brief period of time. Lighter shades of blue and green are the most relaxing and conducive to successful group communication or "relaxed concentration."[1,14]

Consider the environment. The room should be attractive, clean, well ventilated, well lit, with an unobstructed view of the presenters and audiovisuals. Acoustics should be adequate and the temperature comfortable. The environment is rarely considered by meeting attendees unless there is a problem.

Refreshments may be appropriate. The meeting should make everybody feel nourished. "Breaking bread" creates a more cohesive group.

Seat for Success.[1,5,14] Seating configuration and room arrangement will dramatically influence the success of your meeting. The more formal classroom style limits interaction, whereas the more circular arrangements encourage it. You may wish to limit interaction in a meeting whose intent is to transmit information to a large group, such as a lecture or training seminar (Figure 11-1).

If your meeting involves fewer people (i.e., 7 to 15), and your goal is problem solving or decision making, consider a more decentralized seating arrangement (Figures 11-2 and 11-3). These groupings enhance group interaction. They are particularly suitable for meetings dealing with complex issues that require careful deliberation.

Maximum interaction occurs in circular arrangement. The leader loses the position of power, and the other members will feel equally powerful. Here, the risk is that there will be more frustrating disagreements. However, because satisfaction with decisions generally is based on participation, participants will tend to be more satisfied with and confident

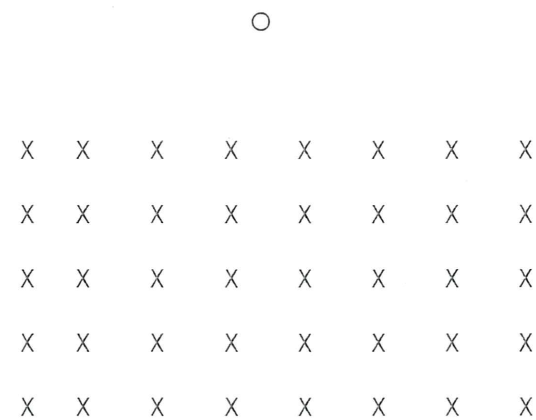

FIGURE 11-1 Formal classroom style seating used for information transmission. This style limits interaction.

FIGURE 11-2 Rectangular table encourages limited interation and creates positions of dominance.

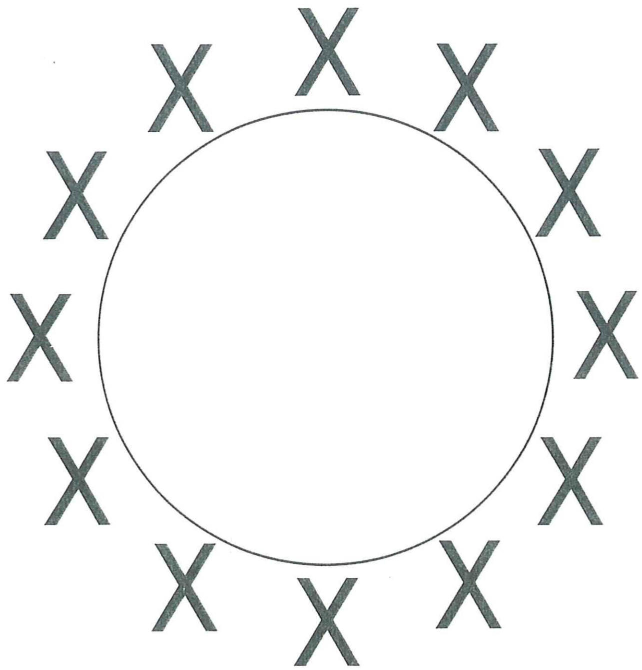

FIGURE 11-3 Circular table is decentralized style that creates maximum interaction and involvement, but limits control and eliminates positions of dominance.

about the solutions. The solutions will tend to be more detailed and contain fewer errors.

Positions of Power and Weakness. The positions of the group members in a noncircular seating arrangement will significantly influence their participation and control of the meeting (see Figure 11-2).

POSITIONS OF DOMINANCE. The head of the table[1,7] is the most dominant position. Leaders tend to sit at the head of the table (i.e., the short end of a rectangular table); therefore the people who sit at the head of the table tend to emerge as leaders. Sitting at the head of a table focuses attention on this visible position. It is easy to hear and be heard, to see and be seen.

POSITIONS OF NONDOMINANCE. Corner and Middle Seats[2-6,8-11] are the nondominant positions. Corner sitters tend to be inactive. Leaders who sit in a corner focus attention away from themselves and toward those sitting at the end. Tension may be evident when the leader sits in a position of nondominance. Sitting in the middle of the long side of a table will limit visibility and communication, particularly with those facing the same direction.

Strategic Placement of Group Members.[1,14] It may be possible to place members of the group to create the most favorable interaction. Any manipulation of seating must occur before the meeting actually begins. Methods include setting place cards, inviting a particular member to sit next to you, or having an ally invite someone to sit beside them. Specific placement strategies may include the following:

- Overly talkative members may be placed in a corner (i.e., position 2 or 8). This will minimize their interaction.
- Withdrawn members may be placed at the other end (head) of the table (i.e., position 7). This placement encourages participation, and the withdrawn member may emerge as more of a leader.
- Argumentative members should be placed apart but facing the same direction (i.e., positions 2 and 5). This limits conflict by limiting proximity and visual confrontation.
- A powerful opponent should be encouraged to sit next to the chair (i.e., position 2 or 12) and separated from his or her support system. Given the choice, adversaries tend to sit across from each other and surround themselves with their supporters. Note how frequently this occurs in a negotiation.

Inner Versus Outer Circle. A member who sits outside the inner circle will generally feel excluded; a member who sits in the inner circle will tend to participate more actively in the discussion. When attending lectures, many choose the front of the room because it encourages a sense of involvement and allows direct access to the speaker. The back of a room discourages involvement and allows the attendee to focus attention on other issues.

RUNNING THE MEETING

A poorly run meeting is like a poorly run resuscitation. No one is in charge and everyone present feels that things are out of control. Whether or not the desired outcome is achieved, everyone involved will believe the situation should have gone better.

Why are meetings so bad—why do they fall short? A study of business managers reveals that 78% have no formal training in running meetings.[2,18] This percentage is much higher for healthcare workers. As much as half of our nonclinical time is spent in meetings led by people who have no formal training. In what other field would professionals allow themselves to be consistently led or advised by someone with no formal training?

Setting the Tone

Take ownership of the meeting. The conduct of the chair determines the extent to which the committee will reach its potential.

As the leader, you must set the tone. Establish credibility. Arrive early and sit at the head of the table. Posture, confidence, and enthusiasm all influence the members of the group. If the chair is businesslike, committed, and task-oriented, the group members will actively participate. If the chair is lackadaisical and lacks focus, aimless discourse is the result. If the chair tells too many jokes, grandstands, or is confused, it will be contagious.

Skillful Guidance. Leadership is the ability to exert interpersonal influence. The chair should be seen as a type of stage director, bringing out the opinions and information, rallying the forces, channeling ideas into meaningful conclusions, and moving deliberately to the next issue.

Participation of the chair depends on the type of meeting. If the purpose of the meeting is to disseminate information, and the chair is the person with the greatest knowledge or expertise, the chair will do the most talking. However, if the meeting is intended as a problem-solving meeting, the participation of the chair should be limited. The chair should encourage the expression of all the opinions and generally refrain from advocating any particular viewpoint.

The rest of this discussion refers primarily to problem-solving meetings.

Chair's Opinion.[2] The chair's responsibility is to ascertain the group's resolve rather than imposing his or her own. Achieving this goal requires effective listening and keen attention.

RULE: The role of the chair is not to accomplish his or her goals, but to encourage the committee to recognize common goals and implement them. Accomplishing the goals should be the focus, not the leader.

The chair should advocate an opinion only after carefully listening to the opinions of others. This strategy allows other viewpoints to be heard and relevant concepts to be incorporated. The chair assumes a risk by advocating a particular solution. A chair who strongly feels one solution is best loses objectivity and is unable to be an effective facilitator.

On occasion, a particular decision of great importance may appear to have only one satisfactory solution. If this is the case, the method by which this issue should be resolved is by premeeting "jawboning." Do your homework. Solve the problem in advance. Take a stand only when the outcome is assured.

Managing Air Time

It is the charge of the chair to guide the discussion to a meaningful conclusion. This responsibility often requires active management of who speaks, as well as when and for how long they speak. There are many methods to control and limit the discussion on a topic.

Start and stop on time or even earlier. The chair should stress promptness. Late members shift the focus of the meeting from the topic being discussed and often require members to reexamine information or decisions that have already been addressed.

Limit time on the topic. Time limits, set in advance, will help govern the discussion. Within reason, adhere to those limits. This discourages rambling. When a topic requires more time than originally thought, seek group agreement to extend the time on this topic in exchange for decreasing time on another. Time limits for individual members may be necessary when there are a large number of people who would like to speak, the topic is controversial, or there are domineering members of the group.

Sequence discussants to provide order. It may be expedient for the chair to exercise control over who will speak next. Ask people to raise their hands, silently recognize them, and call them in order. Between discussants, state the sequence of speakers. This method lets members know that they will get their chance to speak. It allows them to attend to the discussion rather than focus their concentration on working their way into it.

Do not allow two members to maintain a back-and-forth debate when others would like to have their opinions heard. Simply state that others would like an opportunity to discuss the topic and describe the order of the next speakers. This process reminds the members that the chair will control the discussion.

Resolve issues in advance that do not require discussion in the meeting. Do not waste everybody's valuable time trying to determine information that may be obtained before the meeting. Assign a member in advance to provide materials or a list of possible solutions to a problem that does not require the group's deliberation.

Facilitating and Focusing the Discussion

The chair is a type of gatekeeper, encouraging pertinent discussion and curbing unnecessary input. The group must be guided to an end point, a decision. When the discussion is poorly focused, the chair must adhere to an orderly sequence of problem-solving steps (see Problem-Solving Techniques).

In a survey of 1000 business people from 3M and Unysis, the three most common problems cited in meetings were getting off the subject, not having clear goals or agenda, and meeting for too long.[19]

Wandering is considered the most common problem in meetings. The participants don't believe it is their responsibility to direct the discussion, and the group leader may not want to be overbearing. Participants become frustrated when they find the discussion is on the third tier of digression and someone is telling an anecdote.

It is the chair's responsibility to carefully monitor the discussion and focus the group's attention on the same issue. The chair must continue to silently pose the questions: "What are we talking about now?" "Is this relevant?" "Will this discussion move us toward resolution?" If not, "How can I refocus the discussion without stepping on the speaker?" This may be done by periodically summarizing the discussion and reflecting on its relationship to the agenda item.

Digressions may be dealt with by one of several methods. Subsequent agenda items should be noted as such with a commitment to deal with the issue later. Unrelated items should be recognized as important but not for the day's agenda. If this approach is unsatisfactory, the chair may offer to review the topic personally at another time or at the end of the agenda if time permits.

Drifting discussion requires refocusing by the chair. The better known or weaker the participants, the more easily refocusing is accomplished. The movement requires a balancing of discipline and sensitivity. It is crucial to maintain an awareness of the feelings of the participants.

Lack of clearly stated agenda/goals creates confusion. Establish a clear direction from the outset and adhere to it. Present a brief review of the agenda. Begin each topic with a concise presentation of the decision to be made (i.e., an orientation of the goals). Describe the method by which the goal will be reached. It may be helpful to provide an impartial review of the alternatives. Describing and following an intended order of discussion will help members stay on track while discouraging digression.

Closing the Discussion

Poor closure is a frequent problem of inexperienced group leaders. The discussion starts late, wanders without progress, and runs beyond the scheduled time. There are several common misconceptions regarding the closure of a discussion.

"The discussion must go on until everybody has said as much as they want to on the topic." Group input is critical. Yet it is not necessary for each member to participate in a limitless discussion. The chair is responsible for determining when the discussion has gone on long enough. This may occur when no new concepts are being presented or when the group appears to have reached consensus.

"Everyone must agree." Although it is preferable to reach unanimity of the group, it may not be possible. When the chair recognizes that the sentiments of the individual members are established, it is time to conclude the discussion. The chair should then summarize the information and seek general consensus. Decisions made by consensus are preferable to those made by vote. It encourages the support of members who may be responsible for implementation.

"We must decide all of the details now." Determining the fine points may unnecessarily prolong a meeting. The specific components of a decision often are developed best in a subcommittee or by an individual who is responsible for the implementation.

When a stated goal of the agenda is met, conclude the segment with a summary of what has been decided. Describe the conclusion, assignments, and implementation method. Then move on to the next topic.

Bringing the Meeting to a Close (Box 11-5)

Ending the meeting well is as important as beginning it and running it. End the meeting when decisions are made, there is no new information, or the issues left can better be dealt with by subcommittee. Give everyone a brief opportunity to voice some final words. This technique allows members to voice an issue important to them when there may not have been a prior opportunity.

Summarize. Allot time on the agenda to summarize what has been accomplished. Review the meeting highlights. Compare the decisions to the goals. Praise the group and acknowledge their contributions. Always try to end on a positive note.

Clarify Responsibilities. Define what is to be done and by whom. Clarify actions that members have agreed to take and gain commitment for their completion. Set realistic deadlines for actions. It is often helpful to establish an agreed upon time frame for completion of each task. Each participant should leave with a clear understanding of his or her responsibilities.

Schedule Next Meeting. If a follow-up meeting is required, it may be appropriate to schedule it before adjourning, since all of the essential members may be together. This strategy will assist members to develop a commitment to the deadlines. An exception to this approach exists when the time frame for task completion cannot be determined in advance. Then, a general time frame and a mechanism for contacting members should be established.

Distribute the Minutes

The purposes of meeting minutes are to document what has occurred and remind participants of what is to be done. The minutes should enumerate the agreed upon actions, deadlines, and individuals responsible for completion of the actions. The chair is responsible for creating the minutes in a way that accurately reflects the essential elements of the meeting.

BOX 11-5

CLOSING THE MEETING

1. End on time
2. Summarize
3. Assign tasks
4. Schedule next meeting

Minutes should be distributed quickly. It is appropriate for the chair to communicate occasionally with the meeting members to check their progress on completing actions.

PROBLEM-SOLVING TECHNIQUES

Decisions involving a group are generally better and more satisfactory than decisions made by an individual. Group decisions also generate unity and cooperation, enhance communication, and develop commitment. A variety of problem-solving methods incorporate the advantages of the group participation in the decision-making process.

All of the problem-solving techniques have in common an orderly sequence of problem-solving steps:

- Identify problem
- Describe facts
- Determine alternatives
- Choose best solution
- Determine implementation method

This chapter reviews two problem-solving methods.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a simple, effective, easy-to-use method of problem solving that has broad application. Its value is derived from incorporating the creativity of groups and deferring to the judgment of individuals. Brainstorming encourages the group perspective and reduces personal bias. The steps of brainstorming are the following:

1. *State problem*—Determine the specific issue to be resolved by the group. Gain commitment from the group to focus on solving the problem. Describe the process and set time limits. Encourage a positive approach.
2. *Generate solutions*—Call for ideas, suggestions, and solutions from the committee members. Encourage each participant to say whatever comes to mind, no matter how well thought out. A nonthreatening environment in which each member feels free to express his or her ideas without fear of ridicule or criticism will engender the greatest creativity. There are no "bad ideas" or "wrong opinions." List each contribution. A structured exploration of ideas may follow.
3. *Develop criteria*—This important step provides a bridge between the generation and selection of solutions. It encourages the group to examine individual and group values. Agree on the standards against which the alternative solutions will be judged. This step may be difficult and may require thorough examination. Once the group agrees on acceptable criteria, selection of the solutions is easy.
4. *Compare alternatives to criteria*—Discuss each option in terms of the criteria developed by the group. Solutions that don't meet the most important criteria may be eliminated or receive a low ranking. Allow a consensus to emerge.
5. *Identify the agreed upon consensus*—When the group has reached consensus, the facilitator should review the group's decision. Test understanding and agreement, ask for commitment, and develop the implementation steps.

The Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique is an increasingly popular method of solving complex and controversial issues in a group format. This technique involves each participant and maintains confidentiality in decision making. The group gathers in a room, and the facilitator poses the question and leads the group through the following six steps:

1. *Develop individual answers*—Each member of the nominal group develops solutions to the problem. These are written on paper for later reference and discussion.
2. *Compile group's solutions*—The facilitator asks each individual to contribute one idea at a time and then records each on a visible medium such as a flip chart or overhead projector. This process continues until all ideas are presented.
3. *Clarify each idea*—Each idea is reviewed. The facilitator and members of the group ask for explanations and clarifications.
4. *Take preliminary vote*—Each individual prioritizes and ranks the solutions. Then an anonymous vote of the group is taken to determine which alternatives are considered the best by the group.
5. *Discuss differences of opinion*—The initial ranking compiled by the group vote is discussed. Major discrepancies are examined to ensure each member clearly understands the information.
6. *Select preferred solution*—After the discussion is completed, members again prioritize their solutions. A final anonymous vote is taken and a solution chosen.

HANDLING AN IMPASSE

Problem-solving meetings depend simultaneously on active participation of the members and controlled flow of the discussion. However, some members may be too active and others may refuse to participate. It may be difficult to guide the discussion when members do not recognize their responsibility to participate in the decision-making process.

Although the leader is responsible for facilitating the discussion, he or she is not totally responsible for the success or failure of the meeting. This misconception places an unreasonable burden on the chair and sets up an antagonistic relationship between the chair and group members.

Dealing with Difficult People

Good group leaders have highly evolved interpersonal skills. They can balance the human need to participate with the group desire to control direction and input. It is necessary to withhold judgment so that potentially valuable participation and group creativity will not be stifled. Simultaneously, the leader must limit and guide the discussion to move it to conclusion.

Emotion. The expression of feeling may be discouraged by some group leaders because they fear the exposure of too much emotion. They may be concerned that emotional expressions will damage relationships and distract the problem-solving process. Alternatively, they may believe that the meeting can be a success only if everybody is affable and friendly. This approach creates a public relations event, not a decision-making meeting.

Exposure of true emotion may harm relationships, but is more likely to result in meaningful decisions. Emotional responses to issues should not lead the chair to panic but rather should be tolerated. In fact, the chair would be well advised to express gratitude for the display of concern about such an important issue.

Personalized emotional reactions directed toward an individual, on the other hand, should not be tolerated. Immediately, restore order by saying "This is not the forum for this particular discussion. Let's focus on the issue." This is an opportunity to refocus the discussion by providing an objective summary of the issue and the decisions that have been made.

Dominator. The person who does the most talking usually feels as though the most was accomplished. The dominator tends to monopolize the discussion at the exclusion of the other participants.[20] Dominators can appear in several forms. They may be very talkative, self-appointed experts, or an angry person with an ax to grind. The common characteristic is the desire to talk without listening; many want to run the meeting. Do not allow a member to inhibit group creativity by running the meeting into the ground.

The dominator is usually a valuable participant and should not be totally silenced. Doing nothing may allow the meeting to spiral out of control. Alternatively, a head-to-head confrontation may create an intolerable conflict. At best, the meeting becomes a spectacle; at worst, the chair will lose. In either case, many good ideas may be stifled and everyone present will be uncomfortable.

There are many more subtle and successful methods for dealing with the dominator. Arrange the seating to put the dominator in a less powerful position, such as a corner next to the chair. This positioning decreases the visibility and influence of the dominator on the rest of the group. Impose structure by obtaining group agreement to limit discussion by each individual to a certain length of time. Duly note what is said, and address the discussion to others by asking what they think. Maintain the focus of the discussion toward the chair; do not allow the dominator to be the focus.

Less subtle body language may be successful. Putting an open palm out, signaling "stop," will usually quiet the speaker. Standing will draw attention directly to the chair and away from the dominator.

If it is still difficult to control the dominator, take a break, and use the time to talk directly to this person. Explain the value of the group process and of allowing other, quieter participants to speak.

Silent Members. Even in the most participatory meetings, one or more members may not be actively engaged in the discussion. This may occur because the member(s) is shy or feels inhibited by more dominant members. To gain the greatest value of the group process, it is important for the leader to recognize the inactive members and encourage their input.

Avoid calling attention to silence as a means of changing it. Do not make a joke at the expense of a quieter member. Although perhaps well meaning, these techniques will discourage participation.

To encourage silent members, seat them in a power position such as the end of the table. Bring them out without a threat by asking a simple, direct question. Allow early and easy success by responding supportively and integrating their reply into discussion.

Handling Difficult Situations

Emotion, disagreement, and conflict in moderation may result in the most creative, well thought out decisions. However, when tempers rise and anger threatens the success of the meeting, the chair must take decisive action without becoming embroiled in the conflict. The only thing worse than watching a meeting deteriorate around you is participating in the destruction. The worst response is anger. It may relieve your tension, but it will add to everyone else's.

Focus on Issues. Frequently, the disagreeing members will have adopted different positions on the same issue. In an attempt to defend their position, the members may become contentious. This situation can usually be resolved simply by refocusing the discussion on the issue.

Process Checks. When the chair feels out of control of the process and recognizes that the discussion is wandering, several methods may be used to bring the meeting back into focus. The chair may ask a particularly rational member, "What do you think is happening?" This technique will usually bring the group's attention to the new speaker while the chair takes the opportunity to regain focus and control.

If the discussion is off track and both the chair and members seem confused, the chair might state, "We are clearly off track and moving in different directions. Does anybody have an idea of how to get back on track?" This usually works because the members all concentrate their attention toward reestablishing an orderly discussion.

Another successful technique is simply "taking a break." During the recess, the chair has an opportunity to gain composure, establish control over dominators, discuss methods of moving forward, and enlist support from group members.

SUMMARY

Meetings are conducted by, attended by, and intended for people. In the setting of a meeting, it is necessary to remember the basic needs of the participants. They need to participate in a meeting that:

- Is in a comfortable environment
- Values and appreciates its members
- Provides an orderly approach to issues (agenda)
- Uses time efficiently
- Accomplishes its tasks during and after the meeting

If you attend to the needs of the participants in a concerned and professional manner, your meetings can go far beyond the ordinary.

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