

More Effective Meetings by Del Suggs

“I hate meetings!” Does that sound like your members? Unfortunately, meetings are a necessity. It’s how we get things done. It’s how we make things happen. It’s how we consolidate our individual efforts into a more powerful force. If your members hate to meet, then it’s time to do something altogether different.

Many people get put in charge of an organization with very little training other than their own personal experience. That means it’s hard to be a good chair yourself, even if you’ve experienced meetings with an effective chair. Meeting management skills must be developed and practiced. I thought I would share with you a number of techniques for more effective meetings.

Before the Meeting

Begin by “defining” the meeting. There are basically five purposes for any meeting:

1. To Exchange Information
2. To Make Decisions
3. To Solve Problems
4. To Explain Issues
5. To Share Concerns

Note that these are all “action” statements. Meetings are for action.

It is important for your members to know why they are meeting. If they don’t know the purpose of the meeting, then they may skip it. Or, they may attend because they are required but not really participate. Make sure your meeting has a purpose and explain that purpose to your members.

Schedule the best time and place for the meeting. If you’re in charge, it can be tempting to set the meeting time when it’s most convenient for you. Remember that one major function of any meeting is to bring

your members together. Make sure that the meeting is held at a time and place that is best for the majority. If there is not a single convenient time for every one, then rotate meetings so that the most members can attend the most meetings.

Set the beginning *and* ending time for your meeting. Your members are busy people. Their time is important. You will have more success with both attendance and participation if your members know how long the meeting will be. And here’s a hint: if you keep your meetings to one hour or less, you’ll find them both more efficient and better attended.

Create and distribute your agenda in advance. Everyone attending should have a copy of the agenda well before the meeting. If you are handing out agendas to members when they arrive, you’ve missed any opportunity for any real preparation.

Have a “consent agenda.” Reports from standing committees (or tasks force), minutes from previous meetings, the treasurer’s report, and any other reports should be included in the consent agenda. Then, for the sake of brevity, you can simply move and second the consent agenda. There is rarely a reason to read the previous minutes or the financial report aloud when the members can review the material in advance. Of course, members can ask that an item be removed from the consent agenda for discussion, if necessary. Then you can move on to the important items on the agenda.

List an anticipated action for each agenda item. That explains why the item is on the agenda along with what action you expect from your board members. For example, don’t just list an agenda item as “Spring Formal.” State the action you expect: “Spring Formal: form task force of 5 members.” Or, “Spring

Fling Band: make final selection.” You can have discussion or information items: “New Coffeehouse Program for Fall Semester: information and discussion.” Having an anticipated action explains why these items are on the agenda.

During the Meeting

Take useful and pertinent minutes. Don’t get sidetracked trying to document every single word spoken at your meetings. Make sure your secretary, recording secretary, staff member, or whoever is in charge of minutes captures the main ideas and tangents that occur. You must record any actions (such as motions, seconds, and votes) to demonstrate that proper procedures were followed. It’s also important to include any items which will be discussed or resolved at a future meeting, and any assignments that are made.

Follow your agenda strictly. Don’t allow new business to supersede the original reasons for the meeting. Don’t let members interrupt the meeting with questions or information that is unrelated to the item at hand. Your members all received the agenda in advance. They should be familiar with the business to be accomplished. Therefore, you can move forward and call for the anticipated action with each item.

Adjourn on time, or agree to stay later. For example, twenty minutes before the scheduled end of the meeting, the Chair might say: “If we continue to discuss the bands we are considering for the Spring Fling, we will need to stay an additional fifteen minutes to select the members to attend the National Convention. Can everyone stay that long, or should we end this discussion and move immediately to

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that decision?”

Make sure that each member says at least one thing at every board meeting. While this is primarily the Chair's responsibility, everyone can help make this happen. For example: “Brittany, you haven't said a word on this. Who do you think should be the first performer in the new coffeehouse?”.

Encourage “dumb” questions, respectful dissent, and authentic disagreements. We gain more from defending our positions than we do from simple agreement. Find a chance to be encouraging at every meeting: “Chip, that's not a dumb question. I didn't know the answer, either.” Remember, too, that compromise is important, and that you will generally get a better program by combining ideas from different sources than just accepting the first concept on the table.

Set the time and place for the next meeting. If your organization doesn't meet regularly, then you'll need to set each subsequent meeting at the current one. While selecting the day, time and place for your next meeting, don't forget the members who are absent at this meeting. If some members are unable to meet on certain days and times, then schedule the next meeting at a time they can attend.

After The Meeting

Prepare the minutes promptly. It is important to capture both the facts and the spirit of the meeting as quickly as possible. That way, if the secretary has a question it will still be fresh in the minds of others who attended. If the minutes aren't written immediately you run the chance of missing not only the essence of the business but the actions that were taken as well.

Review and evaluate the meeting. How did it go? Did certain members dominate the discussion? If so, you may need to find a way to limit their input. Were there distractions from the agenda? Then find a way to keep your members focused and on task. Did the meeting run too long? Pacing is vital to keeping a meeting flowing, but remember to keep your agenda realistic. Trying to force too much content into a meeting can be a recipe for disaster.

Meeting Etiquette

There is more to an effective meeting than just the previous items. Those attending the meeting must demonstrate civility and consideration. Showing respect and courtesy is vital, especially since civility is a current national issue. As our actions rub against each other, manners serve as a social lubricant to smooth the friction of our lives.

Let me offer these suggestions to those who attend meetings. They are simple and obvious, thus they are frequently overlooked.

Be prompt. That means arrive early or on time, but don't be late. Latecomers delay the meeting, create confusion and interfere with the flow of business. Make it a point to be on time.

Avoid interruptions. Turn off your cellphone, don't log on and check your email, and put away the gameboy. You need to pay attention to the business before you.

Be cognizant of time. You should certainly say what you want, and participate in the meeting, but not to the extent that others can't get the floor. Don't dominate the discussion.

Refrain from distractions. Avoid whispering those humorous or obnoxious comments to your

neighbor. Don't shuffle your papers, or use the meeting to sort your files and clean out your notebook. Don't pass notes and giggle.

Stay for the entire meeting. Don't slip out early. Important information is often announced during the last few minutes of a meeting. In fact, holding some items until last can be a good strategy by the Chair to keep members focused and present.

Show courtesy and respect for your fellow members, for the Chair, and for the organization you represent. And, while not everyone can learn to love a meeting, you can certainly make them more efficient and more effective. What's not to love about that?

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