

Success

by Design

Building Strong Organizations... Strong Communities

August 1998

Agdex 1922

Effective Meetings

Everyone involved in organizations is interested in making sure that their meetings are as productive and efficient as possible.

The Chairman

Prepare for the meeting. This includes preparing and distributing an agenda well ahead of the meeting, making sure that all meeting arrangements are in order and ensuring that all members understand their role in the organization and at the meetings.

Help the group establish rules of order. This ensures that all members are involved in discussions and decisions, and keeps the group focussed on the task at hand.

Balance active discussion and participation with a need to accomplish the goals of the meeting in the appropriate time frame.

The Agenda

The agenda is a critical component to a well run meeting. The agenda is really just a list of topics to be covered at the meeting. Everyone attending the meeting should receive a copy of the agenda a few days before the meeting. This will serve as a reminder of the meeting and give participants the opportunity to prepare for the topics to be discussed. Members can also make sure that all topics they want discussed are included on the agenda.

The following agenda is often used:

- call to order
- approval of the agenda
- reading and approval of the minutes of the last meeting
- officers' reports
- standing committee reports
- ad hoc committee reports
- unfinished business
- new business
- adjournment

The agenda should, however, be arranged to meet the needs of the individuals in your group.

Consider the following tips:

- Place key items for discussion at the beginning of the agenda to ensure that participants have a lot of energy and you don't run out of time.
- Some items tend to unite the group, while others can divide it. Start and end the meeting with a topic that unites the group.
- Put time limits on agenda items. Stick to them.
- Review the agenda at the beginning of the meeting for additions, deletions or revisions.

Alberta
AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Group Decision Making

Establishing the purpose and agenda of a meeting is often easier in comparison to making decisions as a group. Every meeting will require that decisions are made. Therefore, it's important to set some "ground rules" for how the group will do this.

1. Define the issue or issues. Clearly separate all issues. Decide on the criteria that any solution will have to meet in order to be acceptable to the group.
2. Brainstorm alternatives. As members offer suggestions, record them on a flip chart. All suggestions should be accepted without criticism or evaluation.
3. As a group, explore the pros and cons of each idea. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative? Does the idea meet the criteria? If not, could it be changed to meet the criteria?
4. Choose an alternative based on the discussion. Choosing a solution can be done by voting – either secret or public ballot. It could also be done by consensus. What matters is that every group member has had the opportunity to participate in making the decision. If everyone doesn't feel they have input, the solution can be difficult to implement.
5. Evaluate the outcome. This can be done once the action has been implemented. It can be done through discussion or by a report.

Group Discussions

Well managed group discussions allow members to have input and feel part of the decision. Try some of these techniques to involve people.

One-liners – The chairman of a large group might say "Before going on, let's find out what everyone thinks of this. Let's have comments from anyone who would like to speak. Please limit yourself to one sentence." This allows for everyone to take a quick "read" of where people

are at, without one or two individuals giving long speeches. Each person will have to be clear and concise.

Survey – After a quick discussion, ask for a show of hands. This may be a minimal way of involving people, however, it does give a chance to express an opinion.

Buzz Groups – Buzz groups are created by breaking the big group into smaller groups – three or four to a group. Buzz groups can be used to break the ice, generate ideas and encourage maximum participation. One person can be assigned as the recorder. Buzz groups can convene and report many times. In this way, the intensity of the small group alternates with the large group.

Brainstorming – Brainstorming is a technique that generates many spontaneous and diverse ideas. To ensure success with brainstorming, enforce these ground rules:

- No idea can be criticized.
- All ideas are acceptable.
- Pool creativity. Build on others ideas.
- The more ideas the better.
- Make sure that all ideas are recorded.
- Following the brainstorm, screen all ideas.

Handling Conflict

Conflict can arise in the discussions during the meeting. Conflict can be a positive thing if it leads to innovation, change and agreement. The chair of the meeting may need to help the group work through the conflict in a constructive way, in order to reach a decision that everyone can live with.

Consider the following:

- Identify the issue. Separate the issue from the personalities of the people.

- Ask questions to find out why people have taken their respective positions. Examples of questions would be: “Why is that important to you?” “What is it about this idea that you disagree with?”
- Create an understanding in the group of each person’s perspective on the issue. Avoid the situation where members take sides, identify with a position or identify with another member.
- Identify areas of agreement, such as board principles. For example, “We all agree that the budget has to be approved by the end of the month.”
- Brainstorm solutions that address the concerns of all parties.
- Find a mutually acceptable solution without coercion. Avoid voting because opposing members will feel left out of the decision. They will feel that their concerns haven’t been met.
- If the discussion gets heated, take a short break. When the group reconvenes, summarize the discussion to that point and note areas of agreement. Move towards possible solutions on points of disagreement. Sometimes, more information is needed to make a good decision. Table the discussion until the information is available.

Physical Set-up

All of the best planning efforts can be wasted if the physical surroundings of the meeting are forgotten. A seating arrangement where everyone can see each other is of great importance. Check the lighting, ventilation, acoustics, size of room, temperature, rest rooms, parking, name tags, audio visual aids and parking.

Summary

Meetings can be an effective and efficient way to conduct the business of an organization. Good meetings don’t just happen. They are the result of preplanning and constant monitoring.

Bibliography

1. Underwood, Amber. *Effective Meetings*. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 1989.