



## **Conducting Meetings**

How many of you look forward to conducting committee meetings? What? No Hands? Actually, according to recent AMA statistics, conducting meetings sits on a very low rung of most managers' ladder of favorites. Some managers even say that committees typically do not bring enough results to be worth the time they take. Yet, supposedly two heads are better than one; logically speaking, more input and expertise should make decisions easier! So why don't committees work as well as they should? What is missing?

Studies conducted at Harvard School of Business indicate that the effectiveness of a group is a direct reflection of its leadership. They even suggest that an effective group leader can derive seemingly impossible results out of the most unwilling group. Their statistics dash to dust the two dictates many of us have learned to hold near and dear over the years, one being that group decisions involving an element of risk are more conservative than individual decisions on the same problems, and the other being that groups are slow and inefficient. Findings demonstrate quite the opposite when a good leader is at the helm!

Assuming that the leader is the key then, what can current leadership data teach us about becoming effective regarding this aspect of management? State of the art literature consistently points out the obvious (but sometimes overlooked) aspects of conducting and effective group or committee meeting:

1. **Comfort**
  - Adequate ventilation, lighting, and heating
  - Comfortable seating
  - Good visual arrangement
  - Adequate space for writing if needed
2. **Preparation of the Participants**
  - Minimizing interruptions
  - Supplying agendas and documents to be discussed (do not assume they will remember to bring them)
3. **Preparation of the leader**
  - Gather all necessary background information and supportive data on agenda topics
  - Determine who needs to be invited as resource persons
  - Prepare a list of critical questions that can stimulate committee interaction on agenda topics
  - Prepare handouts or audiovisual presentations that will facilitate committee understanding of topics

Those are fairly common sense ways of facilitating group interaction, but what about the more difficult aspects of the endeavor, that is, conducting the meeting itself? Certainly you need a strategy for handling the meeting, and that strategy needs to



involve both the intricacy of knowing your group as well as laying appropriate groundwork with some of the members beforehand.

To form a strategy, sit down at least several days in advance and analyze each member of your group. You can utilize any group behavior model you are accustomed to using. A common one, of course, is the Analytical-Amiable-Driver-Expressive model, but whatever your tool, the idea is that you need to separate the assertive members from the non-assertive ones in your mind and the responsive ones from the non-responsive ones. By identifying those individual characteristics, you can better direct the needs within the group in a useful manner. For example, giving the “driver” a sub-committee responsibility allows him to meet his need of control while giving that kind of responsibility to an “expressive” would accomplish little more than allowing a social occasion on company time. By the same token, asking the “analytical” for new and innovative ideas would not get you nearly the results that you would receive by asking the same thing of the “amiable”.

Once you feel you know your group, consider the advisability of advance discussions with some of the members regarding the agenda or decisions that will be needed. This, of course, refers to a democratic or an information-gathering situation as opposed to an autocratic or information-giving session. Certainly if you know that you have a member who likes control or one you know won’t be supportive unless he has advance information, it behooves you to provide it especially if his non-support can play terminal havoc with the meeting. Your objective should not be to bias him, but to cover anticipated problem areas in more detail so that he can make better informed decisions in the meeting itself and not waste the time of the whole group with concerns that may be of interest only to him. Tracking isolated issues for the benefit of a few wastes the time of all the rest and does not make for an effective session.

Now to the meeting itself. Your job as a leader is to get the maximum benefit out of the group by pooling the resources at hand (your members). In order to do that you must not only conduct the business before you, but you must also direct the human behaviors in the group toward the designated task.

Ideally, the way to begin is with introductions (if needed), summaries of past actions and decisions on the topic (if the topic is not new), a statement of your objective for that particular session, and a lead-in question to get the group started on the subject.

Keep in mind that if a decision is needed and the leader identifies this need to the group as part of its function, but really wants to make the decision himself, then the committee’s time is wasted. If you just want input from the members, but want to make the decision yourself, then say so, so the committee knows its function. It is misrepresenting and unfair to the committee to think that they are supposed to make a decision and later find their solution is ignored or another decision is made instead. They will be reluctant to be “used” again in such a case.



Once the meeting begins, the leader needs to maintain a position of control (keeping the group to its task, reminding the group of the objectives when it strays, and providing periodic short summaries of the committee's progress during the meeting) as well as encourage maximum interchange among members (this may mean suppression of over-active members or drawing out reticent ones or it may mean changing the group's focus when one issue has been covered adequately). Control in the meeting is usually considered sufficient to the extent that progress is moving in the desired direction in the session. Of course, it is the leader's responsibility to provide the group a final summary of decisions and responsibilities at the end of the meeting as well (verbal, written, or both).

With experience, your skills in conducting a group will sharpen. To most effectively help yourself in that sharpening process, analyze your performance immediately after each meeting by asking yourself the following five questions:

1. Did I accomplish my objectives for the meeting?
2. Did I really get the business done I wanted to?
3. Did I facilitate appropriate interaction among members?
4. Did I divert unproductive interaction?
5. Did I provide the best guidance for the group without forcing my opinions on them?

Analyzing yourself, identifying your weak points, and strengthening them the next time is the key toward improving your abilities and your enjoyment of the process as well. Try it the next time you are in a committee leadership role and see if you don't agree.

#### **10 Ways to Wreck a Staff Meeting**

1. Call the meeting without advance notice.
2. If you have compiled 10 pages of advance information that was sent to everyone, read it aloud and explain the footnotes.
3. Let Joe and Edith debate their personal differences for the length of the meeting, thus providing good clean entertainment for all: or
4. Insist that Joe and Edith are really in agreement, and prove it by misquoting both of them. This will unite them in an attack on you.
5. Squelch any new or innovative approach not outlined on the agenda.



6. **Don't snub any friends who may telephone during the meeting. Have your secretary put every call right through.**
  
7. **Answer all your own questions. It may take some juggling, but it's the only way to insure the right answer.**
  
8. **Keep the purpose(s) of the meeting a secret.**
  
9. **Don't listen to others, they will only confuse you. Use the time while they are talking to think up your next remarks.**
  
10. **Track down all the fascinating side issues; lead where they may.**