

Making Meetings Meaningful

“Effective meetings are characterized by participative leadership structures” that encourage all members to become “involved on an equal basis.” (Steven H. Larson, Blue Cross communications analyst). Based on a review of the ‘volumes of literature on managing effective meetings,’ Larson offers some recommendations for handling meeting basics, achieving balanced participation, and encouraging interpersonal communication and behavior.

Review of Basics

To be effective, good leaders should have a basic understanding of meeting fundamentals and the principles of group dynamics. Stressing that ‘the tone of a good, productive meeting is set long before the actual meeting ever begins,’ Larson suggests that leaders adhere to the following ‘nitty gritty’ rules:

- ▶ *Be sure all participants know why they are there* - Making certain that all members are aware of the topic for discussion and of their expected roles ensures that the meeting will run smoothly.
- ▶ *Start the meeting on time* - Larson advises, however, that ‘it’s probably wise to schedule an initial activity that will allow latecomers to catch up.’
- ▶ *Keep your meetings on track* - Once the session’s goals are clearly established, the leader should keep discussions to the business at hand.

“A crucial dimension of any meeting,” Larson notes, “is the balance of participation among group members.” He points out that all too often meeting participants are allowed to withhold their contributions because the group leader assumes that “since all people are free to participate they will offer what they have to say. Unfortunately, the reality is that many people feel inhibited about making their comments even in the most open climate,” Larson emphasizes.

Grappling with Groupthink

One of the ‘critical pitfalls’ of meetings, Larson warns, is the problem of ‘groupthink,’ which consists of people’s tendencies to ‘develop a group way of thinking that decreases their objectivity and their openness to new and diverse viewpoints.’ In a ‘groupthink’ situation, Larson observes, “members’ statements begin to be policed by fellow members to ensure that no one upsets the apple cart by going against the group’s way of thinking.”

Groupthink's tell-tale traits include:

- ▶ *Lack of free expression* - Dissenting viewpoints are smothered by 'membership collusion' or a judgmental group climate, which causes potential contributors to become defensive and fearful of being evaluated.
- ▶ *Self-Censorship* - Unanimous decisions become the method for enforcing group uniformity since, "the more group members perceive themselves to think alike, the less likely they will be to deviate from the established norms."
- ▶ *Downgrading the opposition* - By 'attributing negative characteristics' to potential opponents of a decision, Larson says, participants try to minimize the opposition's "ability to counter group decisions."
- ▶ *Self-righteous expressions* - Statements attesting to the group's ethical superiority also help "combat moral objections from outside opposition."

To counteract groupthink symptoms, Larson says, meeting leaders should:

- ▶ *Legitimize disagreement* - The best atmosphere for a meeting, Larson says, is one in which members 'feel free to disagree.'
- ▶ *Seek out diverse viewpoints* - Soliciting contrary opinions can help reveal hidden risks and unrecognized assets.
- ▶ *Discuss the pros and cons of each solution* - Members should be encouraged to weigh the assets and liabilities of each proposal, with "Oscillation from one side of the issue to the other" required.

Personal Pointers

"Meeting leaders should welcome conflicts and differences of opinion," Larson contends, because such disputes provide "an opportunity to gain added perception and insight" into a situation. Warning that conflict that is "smoothed over always resurfaces," Larson says that leaders should avoid decision making methods that suppress conflict, such as "majority votes, trading, and coin-tossing." Other tips for ensuring the success of a meeting are:

- ▶ *Do not argue blindly for your position* - Be sensitive to good ideas offered by others.
- ▶ *Refrain from competing when discussing issues* - When differences of opinion cannot be resolved, select the next best alternative.
- ▶ *Avoid 'buying off' dissenting group members* - Don't offer dissenters rewards for changing their opinions.