

How to Lead Effective Meetings

SkillBrief

Stewards usually deal one-on-one with their co-workers, but sometimes you have to deal with people in meeting-type settings - and that can present some real challenges.

A good meeting can be great: you get a lot of input, people get a lot of information from you, and everyone goes away happy.

But a bad meeting can be a nightmare. You might encounter hostility. Or you might run into a wall of unproductive complaining. Or maybe you just come face-to-face with plain old apathy.

Considering how angry, unproductive or dull meetings can be, it's easy to understand why many stewards would prefer to avoid them altogether.

One reason group meetings are ineffectively used, or not used at all, is that leaders often don't really have a handle on the real purpose for the meeting.

Meetings generally fall into two categories: Informational and Problem-Solving.

Informational Meetings

These can be for such purposes as reporting on what took place at the last general membership meeting, keeping members updated on the progress of negotiations, getting a briefing from the members about new management initiatives that may be developing on the job...just about any exchange of information.

In such meetings no problem-solving should be attempted, although questions and comments should be encouraged. If problems arise (and they usually do), they should be placed on the agenda for a Problem-Solving meeting.

Problem-Solving Meetings

There are several different kinds of problem-solving meetings.

1. The Problem Identification Meeting

Stewards generally feel over-worked just by handling the problems that routinely fall into their laps; they don't want to go out looking for them. However, it can be smart to look at changes you know are on the way in your workplace and actively identify the problems that might exist or occur as a result. You may want to gather your co-workers and pose a question like, "*What possible problems can you anticipate affecting our group as a result of the change in _____?*"

Anticipating problems ahead of time may ward off bigger problems in the future.

2. The Solution-Generating Meeting

This is often called a 'brainstorming' session. Your co-workers may take a problem (possibly one identified in a problem identification meeting) and focus its energies on generating possible solutions:

- ▶ How might we respond to management's latest decision?
- ▶ How can we gain membership support for our union response?

The goal of such a meeting is to generate as many solutions as possible. At this stage, quantity, not quality, is the aim. The function of the leader in such a meeting is to encourage creative thinking and to keep the meeting going at a good pace.

3. The Evaluation and Decision-Making Meeting

Unlike the first two types of meetings, the Evaluation and Decision-Making Meeting works best with fewer participants. Decisions as to which solutions are best are most effectively arrived at by consensus. The function of the leader at this meeting is to keep the group focused on the task.

4. The Implementation Meeting

While it may be possible for stewards to carry out this task alone, it's almost always better to have members involved. The more that members are involved in implementation, the stronger the union.

In sum, conducting a good meeting is a lot like riding a horse. Hold the reins too tight, and you prevent your group from moving forward energetically. Hold the reins too loose, and the process gets away from you.

5. The Joint Labor-Management Meeting

A JLMC is a committee comprised of management and union representatives whose purpose is to address problems, resolve conflicts and build on the labor management relationship. It is an informal forum, does not constitute bargaining, and cannot address issues covered by the contract. It is, however, an important tool to tackle workplace issues and involve the members on a local level.

-Excerpts from Margery Silverton, LCSW, a Maryland counselor specializing in group and family problem-solving.