



Look At The Clock!

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Ways to Streamline Meetings

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No More Captive Audiences

Time is one of the most valuable resources of any meeting. The uses of time are many, and the benefits from attending a meeting rather than participating in some other activity frequently favor the other activity. This puts pressure on planners to use meeting time well.

As more and more women become multi-role persons—homemaker/worker, homemaker/student, homemaker/volunteer—time demands increase. Women may well opt for more limited or no organizational participation. Women's role changes also affect men's organizational participation because many men now assume a larger share of home and family responsibilities. Many organizations now face a leadership or participation crunch.

Increases in cultural, educational and recreational facilities and opportunities also offer strong competition for "free" hours once spent attending meetings or participating in organizations.

Organizations can't turn back the clock—they can't count on having "captive" audiences who come to meetings regularly because they crave socialization and have few alternatives. Group leaders must shore up their agendas, streamline their procedures, and vitalize their meeting formats. If they don't, they may soon be presiding over empty meeting rooms.

Time IS of the Essence

Numerous time-use strategies are available to the person in charge if he or she is willing to explore and incorporate appropriate measures.

Often we hear the complaint, "The meeting was too long." What is the objector really saying?

- "I got tired sitting."
- "The meeting ran too late so I was sleepy."
- "We tried to do too much."
- "It lasted longer than I expected."
- "I needed to be doing other things."
- "It was a very dull meeting."
- "I didn't really have a chance to participate."

Conversely, when we hear, "The meeting was too short," what conclusions could we draw?

- "We tried to do too much."
- "The time went fast because it was a good meeting."
- "I enjoy working with these people."
- "I wanted more information."
- "The ideas were new and exciting to me."

Planning Produces Payoffs

In planning meetings, leaders need to consider: What is to be accomplished? What is the fatigue level of the participants? What procedures will best facilitate the meeting?

Ill-conceived, vague notions of what is to be accomplished usually lead to drawn-out meetings. When the leader has not set priorities or identified the purpose of the meeting, the meeting rambles because it lacks focus. Too often planning for a meeting is done at the last minute or by someone other than the person who will preside. Poor orientation of participants concerning meeting goals also contributes to long, drawn-out meetings.

A well developed agenda is the first step in the right direction. In some situations, it can be helpful to publicize the agenda in advance so participants can prepare to discuss certain issues and pace themselves during the meeting.

For instance, a board of directors may find it useful to provide advance notice of topics to be discussed and actions to be taken. Board members can collect and consider supporting materials in advance. Larger groups, however, or those less involved in decision making may not want to bother with materials in advance.

The wise leader knows the group and uses common sense in the advance distribution of materials. Distributing materials at the door may be more reasonable. In either case, avoid information overload.

Tailor Meetings to Meet Needs

How long should a meeting be? The general saturation point seems to occur between 2 and 2½ hours, but there are exceptions. The time of day and the room temperature are factors to consider. Meetings that run late into the night frequently produce decisions that stem not from consensus but from exhaustion. Aware groups may put a curfew on decision making.

The following questions suggest approaches to better management of time:

1. Do we begin at the scheduled hour?

Begin your meeting on time! Many groups waste up to 45 minutes waiting for members to gather. This is costly. To change this pattern, notify everyone that the next meeting will

begin promptly. Plan something special as the initial agenda item and stay on schedule. Members who feel they have "missed out" will try to be more punctual next time. Stabilize the practice by always starting on time thereafter. Make it stick!

2. Is our starting time appropriate?

Evaluate your starting time. If the majority feels it is too early, set it at a more convenient hour. Or consider beginning 30 minutes earlier.

3. Are we using breaks to the best advantage?

Think about your break times and social hours. Some groups could well dispense with introductory social time. In such cases, coffee, milk, water, and/or soft drinks might be made available throughout the session on a help-yourself basis. Or a 10- to 15-minute break might be more helpful or refreshing after the group has been deliberating an hour. Realize, however, that your organization may need informal social time. It's up to you to determine when and how much. Social time helps members get acquainted, make informal committee exchanges and neutralize conflicts.

4. Are we using written reports?

Committee reports are often routine. Oral reports are usually longer than necessary and give too much information. Try distributing one-page written reports at the start of the meeting. Committees should, of course, report orally on proposals that require group action.

Distribution of minutes and calling for approval of minutes "as distributed" also saves time. Few people really listen to the reading of minutes—and minutes are seldom read well. Yet, many groups continue this activity. The opportunity to make additions or corrections should not undermine deliberations. Democratic process is not obstructed.

A similar procedure may be followed

with the treasurer's report. Allow for questions and explanation, however, and provide ample time once or twice a year for in-depth discussion of budgetary matters. A regular audit is a "must."

5. Are we giving committees enough responsibility?

Smaller groups can do certain tasks more efficiently than the membership at large. Research, procedural guidelines, constitutional revisions and project recommendations might better be hammered out in committee prior to group consideration. Delegating responsibility can save time, but adequate controls must be spelled out for committees. What are the bounds of their authority? What constraints of time, money and pronouncements are imposed?

Many people prefer working in smaller groups and experience greater rewards for such participation. Thus, the committee or task-force approach to organizational work may induce more involvement.

6. How can we control time?

A written agenda may not be a strong enough reminder to keep moving. Indicating on the agenda how much time you'll spend on each item or scheduling parts of the agenda for specific times may control those who talk too much. Include adjournment time in the plan. Be realistic in preparing an agenda. Your goal should be to follow the time plan but not be straitjacketed by it. Use a timer, bell, or other physical reminder. Solution-minded groups can gain much from this time-setting approach.

7. More, or less, parliamentary procedure?

There are no strict rules for using parliamentary procedure. No one can deny its worth in managing large groups or those with serious conflicts. However, smaller groups and those dealing with non-controversial subjects tend to use more of it than is

warranted—they take too many votes, use needless verbiage and let procedural exchanges slow the conduct of business.

Allowing discussants to speak without "going through the chair" reduces a lot of redundancy. Too many presiders feel obliged to respond to every comment. It is necessary, however, to know what motions, if any, are required by the bylaws. When this is indicated, the group should abide by the spelled-out procedures or amend the bylaws.

Although parliamentary procedures are not difficult to master, many people feel uncomfortable with them, largely because correct wordings, etc., are easily forgotten. Certain groups thrive on ritual. For them, parliamentary procedure is a "must." Time and efficiency are not germane because conducting the meeting is an end in itself.

8. Should we meet more frequently?

Some groups find it easier and more productive to hold two meetings instead of one. Their rationale is that fatigue mars the quality of decision making. If you have two meetings, one can focus on business matters and the other on in-depth discussion of issues underlying policy decisions. Where meeting double-up is not feasible, groups can use every other or every third meeting for study and in-depth discussion, or set aside a half-hour of each meeting for a topical discussion that is not necessarily related to any particular motion but may greatly influence the overall task orientation of the group.

Use Common Sense

Wise leaders manage time to best fit their needs. Common sense dictates that you do not introduce too many procedural changes at the same time, but on occasion, sweeping changes can be effective. Know your group, and act accordingly.

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