

## Don't Let Meetings Make You Crazy

**These five questions to consider will help you get more done and waste less time.**

By Elaine H Ernest, CAE



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Having made the transition from nonprofit CEO to full-time community volunteer, I'm often reminded of how important some meetings can be for creating shared visions—and how frustrating others are when they go off track. But bad meetings need not exist if you weigh the following five considerations, which apply to everything from the full board to committees.

### Consideration 1: Is an Onsite Meeting the Best Way to Meet Your Goal?

Do not have a meeting if

- There is no need for group interaction;
- Needed participants cannot attend;
- The goal is already accomplished;
- You don't have enough information;
- You and other participants are not prepared.

A more effective alternative may be to

- Have a conference call;
- Send an email or voicemail;
- Email a report or memo;
- Ask for individual input.

### Consideration 2: What Do You Want the Meeting to Accomplish?

Decide the meeting components

- What is the subject?
- What are the overall objectives?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- What information do participants need beforehand?
- What are the desired outcomes, such as meeting a deadline, gathering information, or developing resources?

Divide the meeting into subtopics

- Who will take the lead in each area?
- What timeframe will be allocated to each?
- What method or techniques will you use?

- Identify the information participants need before the meeting. Then prepare the meeting announcement and agenda.
  - Distribute the agenda at least a week to 10 days ahead of time.
- Request a reply to confirm that key stakeholders will be present.
- Note any prework that must be done, and by whom, in the meeting notice or cover letter.

### Consideration 3: What Guidelines Would Make the Meeting Run Smoothly?

- Start on time. Leader and participants alike should arrive several minutes early to show engagement.
- Open the meeting warmly, thank people for their time, and recap the purpose.
- If members of the group do not regularly work together, ask them to introduce themselves.
- Establish ground rules. For example, only one person should speak at a time; cell phones and pagers should be turned off; and everyone should stick to the agenda and time allocation.
- Wrap up the meeting by confirming the work to be accomplished, by whom, and by when.
- Thank the group, including support staff, and note any special or extraordinary contributions.
- End on time. If you must run long, get the group's permission to continue.

### Consideration 4: How Can You Increase Attendee Involvement?

To boost participation, a leader can

- Make short premeeting contacts with selected people;
- Ask participants to read background

beforehand and come with a positive attitude;

- Ask participants to serve as recorders, timekeepers, facilitators and so forth;
  - Ask for input from specific individuals;
  - Act quickly to deter disruptors or dominators;
- To help the group, a participant should
- Come prepared;
  - Be friendly and leave out sarcasm and skepticism;
  - Listen attentively, ask questions, and help clarify issues;
  - Avoid off-track monologues.

### Consideration 5: How Can You Promote Clear Communication?

As a leader, you can get points across best if you

- Use visuals;
- Explain unique terms or acronyms, define new or technical terms, and encourage questions;
- Ask participants to paraphrase discussions;
- Clarify all action items and commitments made during the meeting. Be tenacious in your follow-up. Start preparing your next meeting agenda as quickly as possible. Consider details like
  - What still needs to be discussed?
  - What issues were put off?
  - What action is needed?
  - What reports or projects are needed?
 Remember, this is your time. Don't waste it.

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