

Effective Meetings

It happened to me again last night. I sat through a meeting that was anything but effective. After the Secretary read the minutes, rather than simply moving for approval the members of the group began to rehash decisions that had been made at the last meeting. The Treasurer gave her report, but continued to interrupt throughout the rest of the meeting to mention items she had overlooked during her report. And as discussion jumped around among various topics, the Secretary struggled to compile minutes that made sense.

Unorganized and unproductive meetings are not only frustrating, but volunteers sometimes get so fed-up that they drop out of community organizations. If you are ever responsible for conducting a meeting (and soon or later almost everybody is) then you may want to consider a few pointers to keep things running smoothly.

Provide a written agenda. The process of preparing an agenda helps identify the tasks that need to be accomplished and gets you organized for the meeting. A written agenda helps group members see what will be covered in the meeting and follow along with the discussion. It also helps prevent members from bringing up issues out of order if they can see that their concern will be addressed later in the agenda. At the start of the meeting, give members a chance to add items to the agenda that you may have overlooked.

Set up the meeting room. Arrive at a meeting in time to be sure tables and chairs are arranged as you would like. For good discussion, make sure members can see one another such as around a table. For more control of the meeting, have people facing the front with the leader standing in front.

Start and stop on time. How many times have you sat in a meeting waiting for “a few more” members to show up so the meeting can start? Let members of the group know when the meeting will start and stick to it. Soon they will realize that 10:00 a.m. doesn’t mean any time between 10:00 and 10:15. But just as importantly, let people know when the meeting will end and do your best to abide by it. Be respectful of the people who made the effort to arrive on time and let them out in sufficient time to get to their next obligation.

Keep discussion on track. This can be challenging because you don’t want to interrupt or offend someone who is speaking out. But there are ways to politely point out that the subject is not the purpose of the meeting. For example, “I agree that parent involvement is very important, but lets get back to the issue of when to hold the conference.”

Review group decisions. Whether you are using formal parliamentary procedure or informal discussion seeking group consensus, it is important to make sure the group understands what decisions have been made. In the first case, you might say “Motion carries. We will contribute \$100 to the 4-H club to pay for trophies.” In a more informal setting, “Then everyone agrees, we will give \$100 to the 4-H club so they can buy trophies.”

Keep record of decisions. A more formal group will have a secretary to record minutes. But even a small group needs some record of group decisions. More than once I’ve seen groups setting

around discussing “what did we decide about that last time?” If you are leading the discussion simply ask another member to take a few notes.

Bring the meeting to a close. After the agenda has been covered, do a quick review. Did we accomplish our goals for the meeting? Is there something left to be done? Then set or announce the next meeting and dismiss with a simple “meeting adjourned.” If people want to stay and visit that’s fine, but those who need to leave will know that the business part of the meeting is over.

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