

Making Meetings Work Better

MODULE FOUR CONCENTRATES on the methods and processes for making the time we spend together in meetings more productive. “Let’s have a meeting” has been the catchall response to any problem, dilemma, or decision that needs to be addressed, and often it is the best response. But meetings can work against groups if they are not well-planned, well-managed, or if their purposes are misunderstood. Module Four identifies the characteristics of good meetings and points out the pitfalls that often thwart positive outcomes.

CRITERIA FOR FAILED MEETINGS

Meetings are most often hindered by two main factors: misunderstanding between the participants and the inability to make decisions about important matters. Both are understandable. People come to meetings with a general idea of the purpose but with a lifetime of different experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. It shouldn’t be surprising when there is a clash of opinion or a difference of ideas. It is perfectly natural and predictable. But we must also be aware that there are structures for meetings that can help groups get over the bumpy times so that the meetings don’t become gripe sessions for individuals, speeches from the loudest and most outspoken of the group, or worse still, a lot of talk and no action.

MISUNDERSTANDING IS A MAJOR PITFALL

There are many things that cause misunderstanding in meetings, including different personal and cultural experiences, alternate views of the desired outcomes, and personal agendas. The first area of misunderstanding can usually be addressed by having time for individuals to get to know each other in a nonthreatening setting, having people express a personal passion or interest they have and why, and last, acknowledging that individuals see the world differently and that these differences are what adds to the richness of learning. Having different views of the meeting outcomes (or outcomes for the larger issues being discussed) requires a skilled meeting facilitator, a carefully crafted and adhered-to agenda, and clear communication about the meeting beforehand. All of this helps the flow of the meeting and the ultimate outcome.

In some ways, personal differences and different views are easier to remedy than the third component that leads to misunderstanding—personal agendas. When a person comes to a meeting with his or her own ax to grind or issue to put forth, it often derails the meeting

both for the issue at hand and for other issues to come because it so disrupts the process. Meeting participants who want to filibuster the meeting for their idea or cause have some very predictable behaviors. They generally are poor listeners, are repetitive, and use jargon. They make personal accusations and try to exercise power and domination. They always turn the attention to a problem they have. The meeting topic may be homelessness prevention but they want to talk about traffic and sprawl. They take issue with everything—always questioning the why and wherefore of the meeting and the direction it is taking. And finally, they want to take their toys and go home if the meeting doesn't go their way. Beware and be alert. The lessons learned in Module Four will help to divert and prevent this very destructive behavior and allow the meeting to go forward in a productive way.

LACK OF ACTION

Another pitfall that derails meetings is the lack of action. Meetings have different purposes (i.e., informational, planning, and decision making), but all should have an action component, even if it is simply to decide and plan the next meeting. In community settings, the most frequent group tension is between the talkers and the doers, or the process people and the product people. With an agenda in hand that allows for discussion and then appropriate action, a meeting can stay on course. However, it is often hard to make a decision of any magnitude without much discussion and conversation. If a meeting is intended as a decision time, then there are things that groups can do to satisfy both the talkers and the doers and still get the job done. Settle and correct misperceptions and misunderstandings about the issue to be decided at the outset of the meeting and in communication beforehand. Don't come to a decision too quickly. Groups tend to make riskier decisions than individuals; therefore, it is important for the meeting to allow time for participants to think through the decision to be made and the possible consequences.

Explore and review alternatives against the main goal of the organization or group. Use effective decision-making techniques to reach consensus and determine the course of action.

Learning to make meetings work for you, not against you, is a tremendous organizational skill. Think of the time spent in a meeting as critical strategizing and communication time to address the issue and plan it accordingly.