Responsible for calling meetings? Dread the thought of attending another meeting that misses the mark and wastes everyone’s time? This article offers tips to improve the effectiveness of meetings by planning their structure.

Maximizing Meetings: Plan to Be Productive

Michelle Hughes

Poll just about anyone in any occupation on what they like best about their job and chances are few will say, “Why, the meetings, of course!” While early childhood educators attend a multitude of professional meetings, attitudes toward these meetings are not generally positive. One factor contributing to that attitude is the perception that meetings are not a good use of time. How then can those responsible for calling meetings maximize their effectiveness? This article presents tips and suggestions to make meetings more effective by focusing on their planning.

Identify Outcomes

The first question to ask is “Why should we hold a meeting?” Meetings that have clear outcomes are more effective than those that do not. Planners of successful meetings always identify what must be achieved. That is not to say that the planner decides what will be decided. This distinction is important. Consider the following example.

A child care program struggles with getting its limited art supplies to last all year. The assistant director, Alicia, calls a meeting to find a solution (what must be achieved—the outcome). Alicia believes that the best solution is to ration supplies. If she simply gives the teaching team this solution, not only would they not have input into the decision, but there would be no reason for meeting. When Alicia states the outcome as “find a solution,” she identifies the goal without dictating the decision.

Identifying specific outcomes prior to scheduling a meeting helps improve any meeting’s effectiveness in several ways. Most important, clear outcomes help planners decide whether a meeting even needs to be called. Too often, people sit through meetings where they whisper, “This could have been sent in an email or memo.” Clearly identified outcomes are the first step determining whether people need to meet. There are several legitimate reasons for meeting:

- Reconcile conflicting views
- Reach a group decision
- Identify or solve a problem
- Communicate important or sensitive information
- Gain support for an idea or project
- Explore new ideas and concepts
- Report on progress
- Demonstrate a product or system (3M Meeting Management Team, 1994, p. 23)

There are also many reasons for not meeting:

- Meetings should not be held if a decision has already been made or participants have no authority to make a necessary decision.

In addition to alerting personnel to the day, time, and place for the meeting, agendas can have incredible power in setting the stage for making the most of the meeting. Agendas create an advance organizer so that the entire team can adequately prepare for the meeting.

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Meetings should not be perfunctory events. Occasionally organizations set meetings on a specific rotation, such as once-a-month faculty meetings or bi-monthly committee meetings. If a legitimate need exists, then meet. If, however, no reason exists, cancel. Do not waste people’s time meeting only because it is time to get together.

Consider whether the meeting is just an opportunity to share routine information. Would a memo or email suffice? Some leaders might claim that the memo or email might not be read so important information would not be communicated. The argument could be made that if meetings were focused on legitimate reasons for gathering, and routine information relegated to memos, then staff and faculty would read the memos. They would recognize that meetings and memos conveyed different, important information.

Clear outcomes do more than just help decide the need for a meeting; however. The outcomes help structure the flow of the meeting. By knowing what needs to be accomplished, the facilitator can determine the process for reaching the outcomes.

- If decisions need to be made, then the facilitator can determine how those decisions will be made—generally by consensus or with a vote.
- If progress on a project needs to be communicated, then a simple report might convey the information appropriately.

Clear outcomes help planners organize the meeting by ensuring that the facilitator thinks about time issues as well. Reaching consensus on a critical decision requires more time than a simple vote. A report about slightly updated health forms may need less time than a report of progress on a complex building project. Knowing the outcomes of a meeting can shape the process and time within a meeting.

Design an Agenda
The decision has been made that a meeting is necessary. Outcomes were identified and the reasons justify a meeting. It is time to communicate about that meeting with all who are expected to attend. Typically, people who are most effective in leading meetings send out an agenda. In addition to alerting personnel to the day, time, and place for the meeting, agendas can have incredible power in setting the stage for making the most of the meeting. Agendas create an advance organizer so that the entire team can adequately prepare for the meeting.

Sometimes agendas are just a simple announcement of an upcoming meeting. Consider the following typical agenda:

Sugar Valley Day Care and Primary School
December 1, 2009
3:15-4:30, Cafeteria
- Calendar
- Close out for vacation
- Enrollment

What do people know when they receive this agenda in advance of the meeting? Yes, they might think to bring their calendars because it is likely dates are going to be shared. People might get a smile on their faces as they are reminded that vacation is right around the corner. And, they would know someone will be talking about enrollment.

But, what specifically should people do or think about prior to the meeting? Are dates being added, so people need to know their own family’s commitments? Have procedures for the long winter break changed? What about enrollment? Will information be shared or does someone need to gather information? The typical agenda alerts participants to the meeting’s big ideas, but do little to help them prepare to use their time effectively.

Now consider the sample agenda in Table 1. Note how it helps participants understand what will occur at the meeting and how they might prepare for it. These types of agendas are advance organizers that help maximize the meeting’s effectiveness.

If people received this agenda in advance of their meeting, what would they know? Yes, they know exactly what would occur during the meeting, how it would occur, and how long each item should take. How does an agenda like this increase meeting effectiveness?

First, the initial item of agenda setting and review of ground rules plays an important part in maximizing efficiency. Participants have an opportunity to change the agenda if needed. A tentative agenda was established at the close of the last meeting. During the time between meetings, important
events may have surfaced that need to be addressed. Participants can suggest that one or more agenda items be tabled so immediate needs can be met.

**Set realistic time frames.**

In addition, the ground rules are reviewed. Ground rules set the behavioral expectations for the group. These are especially important if participants meet on a regular basis or are facing challenging issues. The ground rules remind participants of what is acceptable and non-negotiable. Typically these rules include statements about beginning and ending times (We will start on time and go no later than __). They identify behaviors that all participants agree to follow. Common examples of ground rules are

- cell phones off
- no side conversations
- no interruptions

Ground rules are especially helpful to new members within a group because the rules help them know what is expected from them, and what they can expect from everyone else.

With the agenda distributed in advance, participants can review the outcomes and identify what decisions need to be made during the meeting. Knowing the outcomes helps participants prepare for the meeting. Frustration often arises when participants arrive at a meeting only to find out they did not bring the necessary tools to accomplish a task or are asked to think deeply on the spur of the moment—often after an exhausting day of working with children.

**People have different styles of participation.**

This type of agenda clearly identifies what needs to be accomplished within the meeting. A planning grid is provided in Table 2. With the advance notification, participants can come to the meeting having given thought to where three more classrooms could be housed. They might have reviewed the hiring
advertisements in advance and be prepared to suggest changes to the ads. They may have checked their schedules and decided already whether they would be willing to assist with the Spring Enrollment Fair or sit on the long-range growth committee. This agenda facilitates decisions because people can come prepared.

Finally, with this type of agenda people are forewarned about what type of participation is expected. People have different styles of participation. Some are vocal and readily engage in dialogue. Some need quiet processing time before stating an opinion. A detailed agenda allows for the various ways in which people think and share ideas.

- The *go-around* alerts people that everyone at the meeting will be asked to weigh in on the topic.
- In the *agenda & ground rules* section, the facilitator might ask, “Any changes to the agenda?”. Then going around the table, members would state whether any changes need to be made.
- *Brainstorming* tells participants that each idea will be accepted before decisions are made about its merit. The facilitator will block any discussion of feasibility and value until all ideas are uncovered.
- Items calling for *consensus* alert participants that they need to be ready to support ideas and to indicate if they cannot back a possible solution.
- Participants also know that they will have individual time to reflect. Known as *I-time*, this strategy encourages members to think quietly about issues before responding publicly.

Two final, related comments are offered to enhance the effectiveness of meetings. Often, meetings are deemed unsuccessful because too many agenda items are listed and too little time is allotted to substantially deal with them. Therefore,

- limit the number of items on the agenda and
- allow sufficient time to address the issues.

Based on the nature of the outcome and the method of addressing the item, time becomes an important factor. Participants’ perceptions of meeting effectiveness may be based on how honestly the items were explored. On the sample expanded agenda, only one item of substance was scheduled for the meeting. The expectation was that team members adequately prepared in advance so that the allotted time would be sufficient to deal with all agenda items. By not trying to accomplish too much, participants can focus on the issues and generate ideas to accomplish their tasks.

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Table 2. Meeting agenda planning grid

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<tr>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Agenda</th>
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<td>Date:</td>
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Participants’ perceptions of meeting effectiveness may be based on how honestly the items were explored. By not trying to accomplish too much, participants can focus on the issues and generate ideas to accomplish their tasks.
Limiting the number of items and allowing sufficient time per item are important agenda-design factors. They maximize meetings by setting the stage for success through meaningful dialogue within realistic time frames. These initial questions start the journey to an effective meeting:

- Is a meeting required?
- What outcomes need to be reached?
- The agenda is then more likely to lead to meetings that are productive and efficient.

Bibliography

Call for Proposals 2009

CALL FOR PROPOSALS
60TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE SOUTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION
January 29-31, 2009 • Myrtle Beach, SC

POSTMARK DEADLINE: August 1, 2008
The Southern Early Childhood Association serves the needs of professionals, paraprofessionals, parents and others in early childhood education and care. This includes professionals who work with children ages birth-8 years and SECA is seeking a balance of presentations, including Infant/Toddler, Preschool, Primary and School-age, for each conference. The planning committee for the conference seeks sessions on innovative practical experiences, programs and research applied in the following areas.

- Child Growth and Development
- Classroom Management and Discipline
- Curriculum Development & Implementation
- Assessment and Evaluation
- Leadership and Management
- Professional Growth and Teacher Preparation
- Community Involvement
- Public Policy
- Family Partnerships
- Diversity
- Applied Research
- Other (If you feel that your topic does not fit under one of the listed topics, you may use the “other” category, and the proposal review committee will determine the appropriateness of your topic for the SECA audience.)

You may propose workshop and interest group presentations that focus on the topics outlined above. Proposed sessions may be 1 1/2 hours or 1 hour in length. If your proposed session is accepted and is proposed for 1 1/2 hours, you may be asked to reduce the session to 1 hour in length in order to accommodate scheduling.

Proposals Should Include:
1. Name, address, telephone number, e-mail address and professional title of individual making proposal. If there are multiple presenters, this information is required for each presenter.
2. Vitae for all presenters. (Vitae may be brief, 1-2 pages.) SECA does not maintain archives of vitae from previous presenters, so your vita must accompany the proposal each year. (There are no exceptions to this requirement. SECA must have presenter vitae in order to award CEU credit for the conference.)
3. Title of presentation that clearly and concisely describes its content. SECA reserves the right to edit titles if the presentation is accepted.
4. Workshop classification from topics listed above.
5. Presentation Language (English or Spanish or both)
Spanish language presentations are encouraged.
6. Description of presentation including:
   a. Goals/objectives for presentation
   b. Synopsis of content (including a presentation outline)
   c. Type of presentation techniques to be used
7. Abstract appropriate for use in the conference program
   (This abstract should not exceed two sentences.)
8. Brief narrative (150 words or less) outlining the presenter’s qualifications to do this presentation.
9. List of presentations during the last 3 years, including title of presentation, audience, site of presentation (conference, training event, etc.) and date.

SECA will not accept proposals based on the same title or content for more than 2 years. Previously submitted and accepted proposals will receive review after all other proposals have been accepted or rejected.

Use of Audiovisual Equipment
SECA does not provide AV equipment for interest sessions. Proposals that are dependent upon AV equipment may be rejected unless the presenter states his/her intent to provide AV equipment. Presenters may rent AV equipment through the approved conference vendor or bring their own equipment on-site.

SECA does not have funds available to compensate interest session presenters. All presenters must register for the conference. The Lead Presenter (as identified in the proposal) is provided complimentary registration for the core conference. (Friday & Saturday)

Mail 3 copies of the proposal with 1 copy of your vita to:

2009 Conference
SECA
PO Box 55930
Little Rock, AR 72215-5930

Proposals must be postmarked by August 1, 2008. Notification of acceptance will be made by October 1, 2008.
Put These Ideas Into Practice!
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**Starting points**
- Consider the purpose of the meeting—is it really needed?
- Know what needs to be accomplished, but don’t confuse that with what one person wants to be decided
- Think about who REALLY needs to attend—require attendance only of those who can further the purpose

**Create the agenda**
- Knowing the outcomes to be accomplished is more important than knowing the topics
- Give the team advance knowledge of the outcomes so they can prepare
- Let people know how decisions will be made
- Make expectations of participation known

**Meeting Agenda Planning Grid**

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**Use time wisely**
- Start on time!
- End on time!
- Tackle only what can be accomplished in the allotted time

**Adult learning experiences**
- Try the Meeting Agenda Planning Grid
- Seek training on how to facilitate meetings
- Prepare more than one person to facilitate meetings, and rotate responsibilities

*Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.*