

## 2 Clarity

# Strategies for Long-Distance Teamwork

Clarity and consistent follow-through promote long distance teamwork. Last minute changes, urgent requests, and frequent emergencies lead to team member frustration and lack of participation. This frustration and lack of participation leads to administrator frustration and burnout.

Be clear about the purpose of each meeting. There should never be a hidden agenda. Set the date two to three weeks in advance and consider the time zones of the participants. The meeting facilitator should request that agenda topics be submitted at least two days before the meeting, so the agenda can be e-mailed or faxed to all participants at least 24 hours before the meeting.

## 3 Brevity

Adult learning modes are magnified during technological communications. Respect and adaptation for individual differences are integral to a successful operation. Meetings need to begin and end on time, even if the agenda has not been completed. Facilitators can help participants stay focused by pausing

# Meeting Across the Miles

by Sandi Schwarm

How are staff meetings managed when team members are miles and miles apart? The business of child care often requires multi-site communication, training, and management. Family child care homes are often organized into local or regional networks. Child care centers are often larger or multi-site to provide cost-effective management. More and more consultants and trainers work from their home offices while child care management offices are often located miles away from the providers.

Using a few strategies to maintain the unique identity of team members and individual child care sites can improve program efficiency, team morale, and staff retention (Schwarm, 1992). Cell phones and computers can compromise or improve the security of the team, the program, or the parents. Use of new technology and business practices can improve or undermine long distance teamwork. What follows are some suggestions for ensuring that your long distance staff meetings are as effective as possible.

## Four Elements of Long Distance Teamwork

### 1 Specificity

Specificity gives long distance team members the information they need. Include all details in all written materials. Remember the five Ws: Who, What, Where, When, Why. Always print the complete address and give area codes with all phone numbers. State the time the meeting will begin, end, and list the time zone.

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between topics or changing presenters. Follow-up of tasks is improved if a skilled recorder distributes the group memory within 24 hours of the meeting. Adding the major accomplishments, decisions, and task assignments to the original agenda outline helps simplify the format of these minutes.

### **Fun**

Long distance teamwork requires extra effort. Including time for fun increases each team member's sense of identity and security. A ten-minute snack or an active break in a two-hour meeting revives the participants and speeds decisionmaking. Occasionally, plan time for the team to meet without an agenda, or end a meeting early to discuss personal celebrations.

Making time for reflection and evaluation affirms the contributions of team members and provides for constructive improvements. Paula Jorde Bloom's Checklist for Effective Meetings in *Blueprint for Action* (1991) suggests strategies to evaluate your meetings. At the close of a meeting, ask if all participants were informed ahead of time with an agenda. Did team members feel there was sufficient time allotted for each item scheduled? Did the meeting end on a positive note, encouraging participants to implement the decisions and to participate in the next meeting? Also, ask participants to reflect on the different roles team members took to help the discussions and decisions.

## **Strategies for Long Distance Participation**

### ***Accordion Process***

Team participation increases with the accordion process. An example of this in-out-in-out process is an administrator compiling a list of professional development topics recorded in the memory of a recent staff meeting. The administrator

faxes the compiled list to each participant for revision and comment. They fax their contributions to the administrator who revises the list, copies, and distributes the final product. Be sure to promote identity and teamwork by including the names of the participants in the credits.

A resource file with material contributed by each team member can be printed after it is compiled, reviewed, and organized using the accordion process electronically. A team can also create collaborative birthday cards with personal notes from each team member

### ***Site Teams***

Teams can provide support and assistance for one another. If Site A needs help getting parents to send healthy lunches, they can create a poster with the problem clearly stated. Site B then takes the poster, brainstorms possible solutions using sticky notes and gives the poster to Site C. This team sorts and classifies the suggestions, adds a summary statement, and returns the poster to Site A. Team identity and morale increase when members are included in problem solving!

### ***Cross-Site Teams***

Teams composed of job-alike participants (a nutrition staff member from each building, all head teachers, or a safety representative from each program) help long distance team members work together. This format works especially well for planning the annual holiday staff party.

### ***Visuals***

Charts are useful for obtaining input for planning or problem solving. Clearly state the request on a sheet of easel paper. Place the chart, colored markers, and sticky notes in a staff lounge. After

team members add their suggestions to the chart, move the chart to another site. When the chart completes the circulation, transcribe the messages, duplicate, and post the composite at each participating site. It is possible to maintain confidentiality by using only one color and size, or determine site preferences by color-coding the sticky notes.

Posters are more durable than easel paper charts. Place one question on a poster. Encourage team members to draw or write their responses. Participants' suggestions have more credibility when written directly on a poster. Move the poster from room to room or site to site each week. This strategy is also effective for parent input on program matters.

### ***Surveys***

Brief staff surveys, completed confidentially, are effective if not used too often. Surveys should always be compiled, with the results quickly reported to the teams. Without prompt feedback, participants have little reason to complete the next survey.

### ***Transportation***

Car pools do more than save gas. Team members traveling to an event together have a valuable opportunity to socialize and get better acquainted. Local team members can provide shuttle service from the airport for regional meetings. Administrators can introduce a new employee to the team members by giving a tour of the sites, explaining the history and describing the program.

## **Use Technology to Improve Teamwork**

### ***Computers***

In addition to word processing and online reports, computers can assist with meeting management. E-mail provides personal communication and communi-

cation within established groups. Clear, consistent formats help the reader scan messages and newsletters for needed information. Use headings that a reader can skim and understand. Keep highlighted phrases short and use parallel formats to outline equally important ideas (Munter 1987).

Using a list-serve, team members each receive the same information. The list-serve can link team members to computerized calendars and automatic reminders. The World Wide Web provides a format to share organizational information, host chat rooms, and promote team building.

### **Telephones**

Cell phones create safety problems. Team members can make it policy to use hands-free devices and not answer calls while driving. Message machines only work when the recipient reviews messages systematically. Check all telephones and fax machines for messages daily.

### **Conference Calls**

Team members can participate in a group telephone call by arranging a specific time for an 800 number and call in code. Participation can be among isolated individuals, or one person calling into a group seated around a speakerphone. Conference calls are effective when the group is not too large and everyone takes responsibility for the quality and content of the call. During a conference call, always identify yourself before making a comment. Direct your comments to individuals by name so that person is alerted to respond and others are alerted to listen.

Interference is distracting and hurts your ears. All participants should limit their audible responses such as "Hmmm," "Ummm," and "Yes." Watch out for background interference from office equipment, static, ringing phones, and doorbells. Also listen for trains, cuckoo clocks,

rustling paper, slamming doors, and crying babies. When participating from natural environments, limit exposure to songbirds, crashing waves, wind, and traffic.

Conference calls can be efficiently managed by identifying the facilitator and recorder before the call begins. At the end of each topic's discussion, the facilitator states closure by asking if anyone has other comments or questions that need attention. End the topic with a thank you, and then identify the next topic and the team member leading the discussion. At the conclusion of the call, the facilitator affirms each participant's contributions, reviews the action items, and restates the time-line for the group memory to be sent to participants by the recorder (Doyle, M. & Straus, 1993).

### **Visuals**

Working in remote locations limits access to shared visual images. Regular use of visuals helps long distance team members feel included. Digital cameras provide photos of individual team members or work groups on the web. Quarterly group photos of the team, sent by e-mail, provide a visual link to team members. Photos also record and share project progress across the miles. Videotapes are useful for employee orientation, staff training, sharing team member activities, or promoting your product or service.

Teleconferencing requires technical competence. Professionals in early childhood education participated in teleconferences that introduced the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Revised Developmentally Appropriate Practices*. It was launched via national satellite to regional focus groups.

Teleconferencing is also used for college courses and in-service training. Groups of parents and providers can link to local satellites for programs such as the Early Steps to Reading Success (ESRS), collabo-

ration between the California Association for the Education of Young Children (CAEYC), and the California Reading and Literature Project of the University of California.

Combining technologies is the next step to effective long distance teamwork. But face-to-face meetings are still desirable! Some agencies hold quarterly meetings for their remote teams. Associations regularly hold annual conferences, mid-year seminars, and local focus groups to bring people together. When face-to-face meetings are arranged, team members accustomed to working in remote sites need time to catch up on personal news and information. Long distance team members need time to regain their sense of identity and security within the group before the actual meeting begins.

### **Make It Work for You**

Long distance meetings can become anticipated events when a few new strategies are introduced. Review meeting materials for the five Ws. Present topics with clarity and consistency. Vary the presentation strategies to improve participation. Then, celebrate your efforts, applaud your successes, and plan time for fun with the team! Meeting management and process strategies can enhance teamwork across the miles.

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