

Making Meetings Count

Strategies for designing meetings to achieve objectives

by Dawn Marie Barhyte

Meetings can be the most powerful tool that directors have for tapping into the creative energy of their staff and fostering greater involvement in decision-making. Unfortunately they can also be a dreaded part of business even though they are a prerequisite to good communication and program quality. Directors are in a key position to make meetings effective by being well prepared and organized. If run poorly, meetings can be a waste of valuable time and dollars and a source of tension among staff. Successful meetings require significant forethought to boost staff morale in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas, the airing of frustrations, and the sharing of successes.

No question about it — meetings are vital to creating a unified team approach to managing a center. You can transform your meetings from *ho hum* to dynamic and create a forum where you accomplish your goals. Employees who leave well-facilitated meetings report feeling informed, valued, and energized. Improving meeting management techniques is a matter of practice. Following are tips to help you hone skills.

As director it's your responsibility to ensure that the time spent in meetings is

time well spent. First, be mindful that the primary reason for meetings is to share or brainstorm information or to develop action steps toward accomplishing a goal. Busy teachers may resent having to attend a meeting with an open agenda. The best meetings have a clear focus, a distinct purpose, and a time limit. Effective meetings are essential to building team spirit and harnessing the combined wisdom of your staff.

Determine if the meeting is necessary

Visualize what you hope to accomplish during the meeting. Granted, in general terms you want participants to come away with a better understanding of the issues that surface during the meeting. On a more specific level directors who plan a meeting should have a concrete idea of precisely what they hope to accomplish. For example, you may want teachers to implement a new procedure in the classroom, to generate ideas for a fundraiser, or to express viewpoints on a new policy being considered. Clearly define the objective at the onset in order to structure the meeting to achieve the desired outcome.

Create a written agenda

Create an agenda and circulate it a few days before the meeting. Going into a meeting with an understanding of what you want to accomplish increases the chances the participants will discuss subjects critical to the meeting's objectives. A well thought out agenda will serve as a road map; it will provide a sense of direction and give the group concrete guidelines to structure the discussion. Meetings will flow when participants know what to expect.

At the beginning of the meeting you can ask participants to suggest topics they would like to discuss and add these to the agenda. This will ensure participation during the meeting; it also demonstrates that you value staff input.

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Decide on a format

The format should fall into place.

According to research, there are four different approaches typical of staff meetings in early childhood programs. First, there is the information-sharing meeting where the meeting facilitator presents ideas, clarifies policies, and provides staff with opportunities to ask questions and discuss information necessary to run the program.

Second, there is the instruction format where new skills, techniques, and procedures are explained and demonstrated. A specialist may offer a workshop on a new curriculum technique, for example.

Third, there is the brainstorming format where all ideas are actively solicited from participants on how to solve a problem. Teachers are invited to generate as many different solutions as possible for resolving a problem. It's imperative to create a non-judgmental atmosphere that encourages participants to toss out as many alternatives as possible.

The fourth format is the decision-making meeting. Participants are called upon to make a decision between presented alternatives. The director provides the information and data necessary for staff to arrive at a consensus.

These formats are not mutually exclusive. Staff meetings might include several. This framework is provided to help the leader determine the purpose and type of interaction so objectives can be met.

Decide on a time frame

Decide on a start time and ending time. Without deadlines meetings may drag on longer than is effective. An endpoint minimizes rambling, keeps staff interest, and respects other scheduling commit-

ments. Meetings are work. They require energy and effort; participants should be fresh and focused.

Solicit input from everyone

While meetings should be structured and orderly, they shouldn't stifle a free exchange of ideas. Get your staff involved. Ask for participation directly. Pose open-ended questions. Follow up on comments with supportive statements: "That's a good idea. I'm glad you brought it up." Show you're actively listening by taking notes and asking for clarification. Teachers' insights are invaluable. As the facilitator it's your responsibility to lead the discussion and encourage participation from all present.

Keep the group focused

The role of facilitator during a meeting is one of the most challenging tasks of managing. To a large extent, the degree of participation and cohesion that develops in a staff rests on how well the director guides the involvement of teachers during the staff meeting. Manage the meeting with diplomacy. Make sure all participants feel included by soliciting their ideas and feedback. It takes practice to keep the meeting on track.

Why do participants wander off the point in meetings? Human resource experts say they may feel isolated in their work, or they want to impress co-workers with ideas, or they may be extremely concerned about something that does, indeed, need discussion but is not relevant to this particular meeting.

If members of the meeting have been silenced by more domineering members, you may need to be assertive to draw ideas from them. Invite contribution and ensure each person has a chance for a fair say: "Let's hear the suggestion Roseanne was in the process of making." Retain an appearance of calm and control, regard-

less of what is going on internally. The best decisions are made when maximum input is given from a variety of perspectives. Even typically quiet teachers will be more likely to interject if they know that their opinions are valued and they won't be attacked for their point of view.

According to an article published by the Society for Human Resource Management "No More Boring Meetings" (Office Solutions, February 2001), one way to encourage active participation is to ask each person, "What have you accomplished in the past week, and what have been your challenges?" Limit talk time to give everyone an opportunity to speak. Be an attentive listener and resist the impulse to talk too much. Follow the agenda items. If topics arise that require more time, table those topics for another meeting: "I can see you're concerned about XYZ but we can't deal with it at this meeting. We need to focus on the issue at hand." Be mindful that your goal is to achieve the objectives you've identified.

Make it relevant

If the purpose of the meeting is to learn something new, make it relevant to all participants. Make the learning as interactive as possible. Your staff will get more out of the meeting by doing so.

Directors can facilitate discussion by clarifying, reiterating, and summarizing comments so that all have a clear understanding of what has been decided. It can also help teachers develop clear expectations of what they are supposed to do as a follow-up and when. Because the capacity for misunderstanding is limitless, good facilitators should get agreement on every decision, help the group develop an action item associated with every decision, and assign a person responsible for it. The meeting minutes will reflect these. Finish the meeting with a brief synopsis and end on a positive note.

Jazz it up

Although meetings are a vital part of the business of running your center, they can still be fun. Make allowances for some joking and small talk. Set aside time to swap stories and share good news. Take time to introduce center news, such as an incentive program or benefit, or an upcoming event. Employees enjoy meetings in which they're recognized and rewarded. Use your meeting to showcase exemplary staff. Pass out rewards for a job well done or going the extra mile. Ask staff to share a professional milestone. Begin your meeting by asking everyone to complete a short sentence — like, "If I were director I would . . ." You may be surprised at what you learn about your teachers, your management style, and the quality of your center.

After the meeting, distribute meeting minutes that reiterate key points and identify next steps. This shows you took your staff's comments seriously. It will also refresh memories and inform those who could not attend.

Meetings consume a great deal of time, but productive meetings can help create a unified team effort that accomplishes its objectives and makes your organization more successful. Being an effective facilitator requires patience and practice as well as sensitivity to the signals your staff are sending. But it will be well worth the time and effort. When you make the most out of your meetings, teachers will look forward to meetings and view them as necessary to their success.

Reference

"No More Boring Meetings." (February 2001). *Office Solutions*, 18(2), p. 48.

It's also critical to evaluate after each meeting. Ask your staff what they think would make staff meetings more valuable.

Checklist for effective staff meetings

- Was staff informed with a written agenda?
- Was the content of the meeting relevant to attendees?
- Did all participants have an opportunity to express their opinions?
- Was the facilitator successful in keeping the group focused on agenda items?
- Was the facilitator able to guide discussion so it didn't get bogged down?
- Did the facilitator talk too much?
- Did the meeting end on a positive note?