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Career Compass No. 38: Your Staff Meetings Don't Have To Be Dreary

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest rolls out a plan for making sure your meetings are a success.

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I supervise an operations group in a community services special district. Our district has a lot of responsibilities and is always trying to address the demands of our service recipients. Because we try to move fast, I hold a weekly staff meeting to keep the 15 operations staff people informed and, hopefully, engaged. The meeting lasts an hour or sometimes 90 minutes.

The problem is that most staff think these regular meetings are boring, don't show much enthusiasm in the meetings, and tend to leave decisions to me even though I'm trying to involve them in the decision-making. In the meetings, many don't fully participate in the discussions, others wander off target, and a few try to dominate. I even have a few employees who often find an excuse to arrive late or leave early. As the one who leads the meetings, I'm frustrated. I believe that face-to-face meetings are important but my meetings aren't working and have little positive impact.

Do you have any suggestions?

Throughout my career as a manager, I, too, have struggled with leading effective and meaningful meetings.

Since meetings are ubiquitous in almost every contemporary organization (including local government agencies) and they consume a significant amount of staff time, it is important to maximize their effectiveness. The first thing to do is to figure out the desired outcome(s) of any particular meeting. For instance, is a meeting intended to. . .

- Provide information
- Brainstorm ideas
- Solve specific problems
- Generate feedback or input on a recommendation
- Create consensus
- Engage participants in making a decision
- Build social cohesion in the group.

Oftentimes, meetings in our organizations are in fact dreary affairs. They primarily serve as an opportunity for the manager to inform others. People don't sense the importance of the meeting and feel that they don't own it. They generally think it is a waste of their time (and they are mostly correct). Therefore, some people tend to come late or leave early or don't participate in any authentic way.

Key Questions and Issues

If you'd like to run more meaningful and effective meetings, you can start by responding to certain questions:

- Why are we having this meeting?
- What should be the focus?
- Who should attend?
- How often do we really need to meet?
- What do we need to accomplish during the meeting?
- How do we present the issues?
- Who presents at the meeting or kick-starts the discussion?
- How long should the meeting last?

Based on my trial and error experience over the years, let me address some of these questions.

Purpose and Focus

You don't want to overuse your weekly staff meeting as the only way to inform, engage, and connect with others. So as not to overburden the utility of the meeting, make sure that you e-mail information to staff on a regular basis, walk around, go out into the field with operations staff, and basically drop in and ask about projects, progress, problems, and how you can support people.

My bias is that meetings should not primarily be about information-sharing. If the primary purpose is providing basic information, then you will have fairly boring and non-engaging sessions with your staff.

Unfortunately, information items take up too much time at meetings and important decision-making discussions often get squeezed for time. To minimize info-sharing as a focus, consider sending out a series of info items once a week in a regular message to your operations staff. Another option is to relegate info items to the last five minutes of the meeting.

Scheduling and Attendance

If your meetings involve a lot of people, it is difficult to engage everyone in the discussion. If you continue to invite all the ops staff, you might consider a meeting every other week. As another option, you might involve supervisory and lead staff every week and an all-hands operations meeting once every month. If you focus on supervisory and lead personnel, make sure that they commit to sharing the discussion with line staff and you distribute action items following the meeting to everyone.

Consider the "Two-Pizza Rule"

Amazon and Intuit have instituted the "2-Pizza Rule." Team meetings cannot consist of more people than can easily be fed with two pizzas. According to Bob Sutton, co-author of *Scaling Up Excellence*, the "2-Pizza Rule" is based on research that big teams are fairly nonproductive, people don't easily connect or care about each other, and coordination problems multiply.

In a LinkedIn.com post, Sutton notes that the average dinner reservation in the United States is a party of four. If the dinner group is larger than four, it is difficult to have a meaningful and emotionally satisfying conversation with each member of the group. With more than four, the group breaks into smaller conversations or some people do all the talking and others say little.

Duration

Most regular staff meetings lose steam if they last longer than an hour. In fact, it is a good idea to schedule the session for 50 minutes, allowing participants at least 10 minutes to transition instead of rushing from the meeting to another meeting or activity. For meetings focused on strategic directions, budget priorities, or the annul work plan, consider a separate meeting that is longer, in a different place, and targeted for the one key discussion.

Formatting and Key Elements of the Agenda

Over time, I have developed a preference regarding the format for staff meetings. I like to start the meeting with a regular agenda item titled "Team Accomplishments." Anyone can acknowledge progress made on key projects (see Teresa Ambile's *The Progress Principle* for the importance of acknowledging small steps forward and thus helping people stay motivated). During "Team Accomplishments," staff can also thank others for their support since no one can accomplish anything by themselves.

I then like to have an agenda item called "Learning Reports" which allows one of us to summarize the learning from an article, book, recent seminar, conference, or what one's teen daughter said at the breakfast table. Sometimes we rotate the responsibility for presenting the "Learning Report" or we leave it open for anyone to briefly present. Learning reports underscore our emphasis on continuous learning as well as engage participates in the meeting.

After these two brief introductory items, I recommend that you schedule a key discussion item that becomes the focus for the meeting. Be careful not to agendize more than one item for critical thinking or creative brainstorming. You should send out the agenda in advance so that participants can ponder the issue prior to the discussion.

Stating the Discussion Item as a Question

It is a particularly good idea to state the discussion issue as a question. For instance, instead of labeling the agenda item as a discussion of budget priorities, the item should be stated as follows: "Given upcoming budget cuts, what are the one or two key priorities for which we need to maintain funding?" Or, "What is one key investment for the upcoming two-year budget?"

For a key discussion item, you might also identify the desired outcome (for example, group consensus on one or two investments for the upcoming two-year budget or selection of two high-potential employees for the next leadership academy).

To allow ample time for the one key discussion question, allocate a specific number of minutes for each item and note the number of minutes on the agenda. After 7-10 minutes of team accomplishments and a brief learning report, you can allocate 30-35 minutes for the key discussion question and end with 3-5 minutes of announcements.

At the end of the meeting, you can encourage people to identify questions that should be discussed at future meetings and tentatively schedule them. Another option is requesting discussion questions as part of your weekly info e-mail to staff.

The Social Purpose of Meetings

Face-to-face meetings are important because they provide the opportunity for people to connect with each other. You might consider scheduling coffee and bagels for each meeting (or at least once per month) with a different supervisor (including you) taking the responsibility. The coffee and bagels in the morning or cookies in the afternoon is aimed to promote socializing and camaraderie or to celebrate progress toward a goal or other team successes, such as getting the operational or capital budget approved. I call this "purposeful partying." We party for the purpose of supporting team efforts and promoting team cohesion. In local government, we unfortunately often ignore the importance of serious fun.

Physical Space

Some rooms are not suited for face-to-face discussions. Make sure you are not all cramped and that there is a round table around which everyone can sit. If there isn't a round table in your department offices, find a location that has one. Having a rectangular table at which the manager sits at the head of the table only reinforces that leading the meeting is the manager's responsibility (instead of a collective responsibility).

Discussion Leaders

You don't want to be solely responsible for leading effective meetings and engaging employees. Therefore, you can ask a specific staff person to present a learning report or plan on kick-starting the discussion on a particular item. Of course, in presenting a challenge to be discussed, the staff person needs to prepare a concise summary of the issue and one or two provocative questions for the group to consider.

Preparing for the Meeting

Even though you and your agency might be overwhelmed and trying to move as fast as you can, you must take the time to think through and prepare for your weekly meeting with staff.

In advance of the meeting, I suggest that you. . .

- Think through what you want to achieve with respect to the one key discussion item
- Send out the agenda in advance and ask people to think about how to address the key question to be discussed
- Identify some people to kick-start the conversation (and note them on the agenda)
- Ask one or two specific individuals to offer contrarian views on the key question in order to generate healthy discussion (yes, plant some divergent opinions).

Conducting the Meeting

In conducting the staff meeting, you might want to rotate the responsibility of facilitating the session and recording key points or decisions.

To engage everyone, be modest, ask questions, and request help in addressing the challenge under discussion (see Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability). At the beginning of the discussion, you might also want to first ask questions or the opinions of lower-status or typically reticent people.

To deal with people who wander off target, you might need to refocus the person. For instance, "Jerry, I see your point. Can we talk about your concern after the meeting?" If someone is in the habit of making speeches, you might need to talk to the person before the meeting and encourage the person to allow others to also express their views.

Following Up

After the meeting, you or a designee should draft a no-more-than one-page e-mail summarizing specific assignments, action steps, and timelines for reporting back.

Other Suggestions

Here are some other ideas that colleagues have suggested to me:

Hold a "standing" meeting. To stay within your allotted 50 minutes for the staff meeting, occasionally ask everyone to hold the meeting standing up. Standing meetings tend to eliminate a lot of speeches and helps focus people.

Take a walk. To generate a more comfortable discussion of a tough issue, request that everyone pair up, take a 20-minute walk, exchange views in their pairs, return to the meeting and then share their perspectives in the larger group as a launch into a fuller discussion. Of course, the walk is also healthy and refreshes people.

To add a meeting, kill a meeting. If you want to add a special meeting to focus on a critical issue or a new direction, don't just add a meeting. Eliminate one.

Declare your decision-making approach for each question. It is easy for people to get confused about their role in deciding a question, especially if the leader switches decision-making approaches for different types of issues. So before discussing a key question or challenge, declare yourself as the leader. Are you asking for people to the make the decision? Have you made a tentative decision and are asking for feedback? Are you requesting input and then you will decide? Have you already made the decision and are simply announcing it? Be clear about what you are asking for. Otherwise people will get mixed messages about how the decision will be made and will over time just shut down.

Figuring Out What Works

Effectively facilitating meetings is a critical competency for leaders. This competency is only developed over time after evaluating your meeting management efforts, testing out new approaches and seeing what works and what does not work, and then practicing some more. Self-criticism, feedback from others, including coaches, and being on the look-out for best practices will help you along this journey.

Here are two resources in respect to best practices:

Amy Gallo, “The Seven Imperatives to Keeping Meetings on Track,” hbr.org blog, Dec 20, 2013.

Roger Schwarz, Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams: How You and Your Team Get Unstuck To Get Results, Jossey-Bass, March 2013.

Enhancing Your Leadership Quotient

Meetings don’t have to be boring or dreaded affairs. Successful leaders know that meetings serve a number of important purposes and therefore think through what they are trying to achieve as the result of the meeting. They prepare for the session, take steps to engage participants in meaningful ways, and ensure that everyone’s time adds value.

In the process, leaders increase their ability to connect with others, create rapport, solve problems, and increase the likelihood that others will follow.

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