Running Church Meetings Skillfully and Carefully

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I'm going to guess that you can resonate with one or more of the following sentiments after attending a poorly-run meeting:

- The decision was made before we walked into the room!
- Joe completely dominated the discussion! Does he ever listen to anyone?
- I don't know why we even set a start time for these meetings. We always start fifteen minutes late!
- It is hard to take our chairperson seriously when she doesn't enforce the rules we agreed upon.
- There were three discussions happening all at the same time. This group has no focus or discipline.
- I'm not sure who is supposed to do what between now and the next meeting! When is the next meeting anyway?
- Is this even a religious organization? I don't remember God ever being mentioned at the meeting!

Running a successful meeting in a church setting takes a lot of work on the part of the chairperson and the participants. Everyone needs to do preparation work, everyone needs to be engaged in the meeting, and everyone needs to do follow-up work. Meetings do not effectively serve their purposes if these three things don't happen. It is the role of the chairperson to assure that they happen. When they do happen, people feel like their leaders are both competent and caring and participants also feel like they are making significant and meaningful contributions to the community by sharing their time and talent.

Preparation Work

Certain things need to happen as a group prepares to meet if the meeting is going to be a success. Setting and communicating the time and place seem obvious, but it is amazing how often people are confused about these simple items. Creating an agenda helps everyone prepare better. Establishing ground rules creates a safe place for open, honest, and inclusive communication. Providing resources to help people think about particular agenda items before they arrive at the meeting primes the pump for fruitful discussions. Let's take a look at the preparation work in greater detail.

Scheduling the Meeting

Setting the time, date, and location of a meeting can happen in a number of ways. If you are hosting a series of meeting, you may have a set time, date, and location. In this case, reminders at the end of a meeting and an email or phone reminder a few days before the meeting will do the trick. If the meeting is a stand-alone meeting, then you will need to strategically schedule the meeting based upon the availability of the participants. I like to offer five or six potential dates and times that have enough variety to capture the different dynamics of participants' calendars. You can communicate these options in an email, a text, a phone message or a post card. I ask the participants to reply and say yes to as many of the possibilities they can. I try to wrap this process up within a few days so that people aren't asked to hold dates on their calendars for an extended period of time. As soon as the best date and time emerge, I communicate it to all of the participants and remind them of the location as well.

Preparing the Agenda

Participants have a right to know what is going to happen at a meeting. They also have a responsibility to prepare themselves for what is going to happen. The agenda serves the purposes of informing them about the content of the meeting and giving them an opportunity to reflect upon the content before they arrive for the meeting. It also serves as a guide and a checklist for the chairperson during the meeting.

The agenda should be delivered to participants several days before the meeting to allow participants to prepare well. It also gives them an opportunity to recommend additions or other changes to the agenda. At a minimum, the agenda should list the topics in the order they will be discussed and will identify the person who will lead the discussion or introduce the topic. When you send the agenda to the participants, it is also a good idea to send any materials that might help the participants prepare for the discussions. This might be an article or a link to a video, a blog, or a podcast. If a new topic is being discussed, a simple introduction to the topic will help participants come to the meeting ready to talk.

Establishing Ground Rules

Rules help to create a safe and enjoyable environment for all participants. The rules that you agree upon should be clear, doable and enforceable. Some of the hardest work of a chairperson is enforcing rules, but it is also among the most important tasks because unenforced rules break trust. When trust breaks down, meetings inevitably leave participants feeling empty and agitated. Here are some common rules to consider establishing before your meetings:

- We start and end the meeting at established times.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- We conclude one topic or agenda item before moving on to another topic or agenda item.
- Talkative members work on listening more; quiet members work on talking more.
- All decisions are reached with an agreed-upon percentage of votes at meetings that represent an agreed-upon quorum.
- Angry outbursts are not permitted. Strong emotional disagreements will be settled outside of the meeting time.
- Meetings will conclude with a review of accomplishments and assignments.

Running the Meeting

The time for the meeting has arrived and you are ready to go. Running a meeting for a church group includes some processes that are not typical to all meetings. Church meetings should include a spiritual formation component, an educational component and a business component. People volunteer to sit on church committees for a variety of reasons. They want to make a contribution by getting some work done, but they also want to grow spiritually from the experience of volunteering for a church committee. Meeting facilitators need to make sure that participants have opportunities to both give and receive at every meeting. We want participants to grow spiritually, we want them to think more clearly about the meeting topics, and we want them to feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of each meeting.

Spiritual Formation Component

Spiritual formation rises and falls on the opportunities that are made available for people to connect with God and each other. Christian meetings should begin with the goal to build connections. Even before the formal prayer begins at the meeting, the chairperson is wise to take a few minutes to check in with the participants. Asking them how their day or week is going will send a clear message that this is a place where they are cared about. Much of this can happen as people walk through the door before the formal start time of the meeting, but it should also continue into the opening of the meeting. The chairperson may ask the participants to offer a thought of gratitude to begin the meeting or a petition for someone in need.

Another important connection that chairpersons need to make is the introduction of strangers. First-time meetings should always begin with an extended time for introductions. Sometimes an icebreaker activity or game is helpful. When new people join the committee, the process of introductions should be repeated. Feeling connected is a deep human need and processes to help people make connections with each other should never be overlooked or dismissed. Christianity is a religion based upon personal relationships. Developing personal connections is among our highest priorities.

Ideally, the prayer experience at the beginning of a church meeting will help to connect the participants with God in light of the predominant theme of the meeting or the ministry that the meeting serves. Prayer can take on many forms, so it will take time to determine what kind of prayer experience will be most beneficial to your particular group. You may need to experiment with a variety of prayer forms and seek feedback from the group about which ones help them to enter into the spirit of the meeting most effectively.

Educational Component

Most meetings are called to accomplish some kind of task that is directly related to a project or a problem or issue that needs to be addressed. There is an abundance of wisdom throughout the world that is available to us on any given topic. Effective meeting planners hunt for this wisdom and develop engaging ways of sharing it with meeting participants to stretch their minds on the topic or topics being covered at the meeting. The content for the educational component of the meeting may address a topic on the agenda, but it may also address the overarching purpose of the group. For example, if the meeting is a worship meeting, the educational component might address the power of music to enhance prayer if music is an agenda item for the meeting; but the educational component may also address the meaning of worship in general. There are lots of possibilities here, but it is important for committee members to have opportunities to think deeply about the tasks or issues they are called to address.

Meeting participants want to learn. They want to be inspired by fresh ideas or learn something new about an old idea. Their participation in church committee meetings should result in a certain level of expertise on a given ministry. Family life committee members should know more about the current statistics on families than the average congregation member. When the educational component of a church meeting is done well, participants are more focused and better equipped to make smart decisions based upon best practices rather than making decisions based upon hunches, gut instincts, or traditional ways of doing things.

Business Component

The business component of a church meeting is the defining characteristic that makes a meeting different from a program. During this part of the meeting, the power of the community is being invested in a small, representative group of people who are acting on behalf of and in the name of the community. Agenda items are discussed, decisions are made, and tasks are assigned for the purpose of advancing a ministry program or initiative for the church.

It is during this part of the meeting when the chairperson's job turns from prayer leader and teacher to disciplinarian. The group is ready to exercise discipleship. They are moving into action and the chairperson is the lead disciple. The chairperson's responsibility is to keep discipleship on track by moving through the agenda as planned and enforcing agreed-upon rules so that honest, focused and inclusive discussions can happen.

The chairperson also needs to act as a timekeeper or delegate the timekeeping task to another member. The goal is to get through all the agenda items, but if the group needs more time on a particular agenda item than anticipated, the chairperson still needs to end the meeting on time and table any un-discussed items until the next meeting. Keeping time will also require the chairperson to move the discussion away from talkative members from time to time so that quiet members will have an opportunity to contribute. Sometimes direct questions to the quiet members is a good facilitation tactic that will help them engage more effectively in the discussions.

Another helpful technique for a chairperson is to offer a brief bullet-point presentation of the committee's rules prior to the business portion of the meeting. It is not a waste of time to review these rules on a regular basis. New members will need to hear them and older members will need reminders until the rules become part of the culture of the organization.

Keeping minutes is an important task that is usually assigned to someone other than the chairperson. The minutes do not need to include all the details of the discussions that happen.

They only need to include the key points of discussions and the decisions that result from the discussions. They should also identify the members who are responsible for accomplishing tasks related to the decisions as well as deadlines for those tasks.

Closing the Meeting

When the established time approaches to end the meeting, the chairperson will need to draw discussions to a conclusion and summarize the accomplishments of the meeting. All decisions should be restated clearly and in bullet form. All tasks that need to be accomplished before the next meeting should be assigned to committee members. It is important to distribute tasks in a just way, keeping in mind that some people are more task oriented than others. This means that it is inevitable that some will do more work than others and, in most cases, be happy about it, but the chairperson should watch for signs of resentment if some members are not doing their fair share of the work. Any important deadlines before the next meeting should also be highlighted.

It is wise to do an informal evaluation to end the meeting. Some meetings I've attended have included a one-word evaluation from all participants. These evaluations are added to the minutes. Every meeting should end with a genuine expression of gratitude. The members have worked hard to be present physically, spiritually, and intellectually. They give deeply of themselves for the good of the community. Gratitude is the appropriate response to these gifts. The best expressions of gratitude are specific, not general. Tell the group that you are grateful and tell them specifically why you are grateful for what has happened at the meeting.

Follow-Up Work

Follow-up work is primarily about trust. You and others have agreed to get things done as a result of the meeting. Doing what we say we will do is how we build trust. Failing to do what we say we will do makes us untrustworthy. It's a simple dynamic that never fails. You need to set the tone by getting something done after the meeting as soon as possible and communicating it to the group. This will usually get others in gear to accomplish their tasks. If a week or two go by and some tasks remain unfinished, it will be important to contact the person responsible for the task to remind him/her to get it done. Committee members who consistently accept tasks and fail to accomplish them even after receiving reminders may need to be invited to discern another ministry in the church. Not everyone is called to serve on a church committee.

A Note on Technology

Up to this point, this essay would have been equally appropriate fifty years ago as it is today, but technology has changed some things about meetings. Using technology such as PowerPoint in face-to-face meetings can help add additional learning capacity for participants who are visual learners. If you are connected to the internet during the meeting, quick and simple research can happen at the meeting when questions arise that can't be answered by those gathered.

Another important option for the 21st century church committee is online meetings such as video conferences or phone conferences. There is a growing collection of software both for sale and for free that allows you to meet with others in cyberspace. The principles outlined in this essay are equally applicable to online meetings as they are to face-to-face meetings, but there are some new wrinkles that present themselves with online meetings.

When churches move into this realm, it is important to discern how often digital meetings are appropriate versus face-to-face meetings. While technology is a given for 21st century churches, leaders need to be careful not to alienate church members who are slow to grasp technological methods and tools. A little one-on-one attention to those who are resistant can be very helpful.

Preparation for an online meeting is also different from other meetings. While you don't have a physical room to prepare, you do have a virtual space to prepare. Testing the software, especially if you are using it for the first time, is absolutely essential. Ask a few friends or colleagues to join you in a test meeting before you offer your first real online meeting. Many people skip this step and the results are disastrous even for tech-savvy people. First-time use of meeting software will almost always surprise you with something. It takes practice to get it right and to use it smoothly.

Conclusion

Running a church meeting should be an expression of care for those who are giving their time to the ministry. We express care in both words and actions. A well-planned and skillfully executed meeting is an expression of care to participants. They will leave the meeting feeling enriched by the experience and also feeling like they are making an important contribution to the community. Running effective meetings requires hard work and dedication, but the more you do it the easier it becomes. Eventually it just becomes a part of who you are and people will be more willing to attend meetings you call.

Resources for Further Learning

Visit these websites and web pages for more information, samples, and tools for running effective meetings:

www.effectivemeetings.com

http://web.ewu.edu/groups/studentlife/Effective_Meeting_Strat.pdf

http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/RunningMeetings.htm

http://www.tcnorth.com/how-to-run-an-effective-meeting-9-unusual-strategies/

http://www.campusactivism.org/server-new/uploads/meet.pdf

http://www.cio.com/article/184550/Running_an_Effective_Teleconference_or_Virtual_Meeting?page=4&taxonomyId=3160

http://www.cdlib.org/cdlinfo/2010/10/13/how-to-host-an-effective-virtual-meeting/