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.
- It's better to agree with Linda rather than deal with the inevitable explosion if you disagree with her.
- 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. When the chairperson assures these three things happen, people feel like their leaders are both caring and competent. 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 simple, but many teams report this step as one of the most challenging. Establishing a trusting environment with clear ground rules and strategic personal encounters empowers open, honest, and inclusive communication. Providing an agenda with pre-meeting, thought-provoking resources helps prime the pump for fruitful discussions. Let's look at the preparation work in greater detail.

Scheduling the Meeting

Setting the time, date, and location of a meeting can happen in several ways. Today we have email, texting, and more sophisticated scheduling apps such as Doodle to make the job easy. I like to offer five or six potential dates and times that have enough variety to capture the different dynamics of participants' calendars. Communicate your date/time options as early as possible to respect the busy schedules of your team. 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 the participants and remind them of the location as well. Sending a reminder within a day or two of the meeting is also a helpful strategy.

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 does not have to be fancy… a bulleted list of items is sufficient. The agenda is also not carved in stone. Participants may call to add something to the agenda, and you may even alter it at the beginning of the meeting if something important comes up.

The agenda should be delivered to participants several days before the meeting to allow participants to prepare well. This 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 or Writing your Covenant

Rules help to create a safe and enjoyable environment for all participants. Some church teams call their rules a covenant, and they review their covenant before each meeting. One creative way to use the covenant for a team that meets regularly is to invite one team member at each meeting to select one item from the covenant and explain what it means to him/her. The rules that you agree upon should be clear, doable and enforceable. Some of the hardest work of a chairperson is holding the team members accountable to the covenant 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, disengaged and/or agitated. Here are some common rules to consider establishing before your meetings:

- We value the relationships we share above the tasks we are charged to accomplish.
- We start and end the meeting at established times.

- We review/explore all or some of our covenant at the beginning of each meeting.
- We make time at every meeting for building trusting relationships among team members.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- When we disagree, we focus on the issue, not the person or his/her character or intentions.
- We honor confidentiality when a team member requests it or when the team agrees that a discussion item needs to remain confidential.
- We ask for feedback to get clarity from other team members.
- We conclude one topic or agenda item before moving 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.
- In brainstorming, all ideas are added to the list and seriously considered.
- Angry outbursts are not permitted. We let strong emotions settle before we speak.
- Meetings will conclude with a review of accomplishments, key communication items, 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 teams for a variety of reasons. They want to contribute by getting some work done, but they also want to grow spiritually. Meeting facilitators need to make sure that participants have opportunities to both give and receive at every meeting. In short, people who attend church meetings want four things:

1. They want to grow spiritually by connecting with God and others in a trusting environment.
2. They want to learn so that they can think more clearly about the meeting topics.
3. They want to feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of each meeting.
4. They want to be clear about their role during the meeting and about the tasks between meetings.

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 prayer of petition for someone in need.

High functioning teams empower team members to share on personal issues at a deep level. The purpose is to build trust so that discussions during the business part of the meeting will also go deeper with greater honesty and openness. Essentially, trusting friendships are being formed. Building team trust requires that there be time set aside at the beginning of meetings to allow team members to share something personal… something that is deeply important to them. All other team members listen with care and avoid giving advice. This is not problem-solving time. It is sharing and listening time. Any comments are offered for support. Any questions are offered to invite the speaker to go even deeper into the details of the story being shared. Due to time constraints, it may be valuable to break a large team into smaller groups for this portion of the meeting.

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 team, 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, and connected teams produce significantly better results than divided teams.

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 a task that is directly related to a project or a problem 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 team 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 team meetings should result in a certain level of expertise on a given ministry. Family life team 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 to advance 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… not disciplinarian in the sense of punisher, but in the sense of lead disciple. The group is ready to exercise discipleship, and discipleship requires forward movement, not endless discussion. The team is moving into action and the chairperson is the lead disciple. The chairperson's responsibility is to keep the disciples on track by moving through the agenda as planned and enforcing agreed-upon covenant rules so that honest, focused and inclusive discussions can happen and real action follows.

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 an 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. A simple comment can be made to engage less-talkative members: "Okay, we've heard from these two on this topic, now we need the other team members to weigh in so we get a full picture of the team's wisdom." Using a phrase like that meeting after meeting signals to the team that everyone's opinion matters.

Another helpful technique for a chairperson is to offer a brief bullet-point presentation of the team'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. This, of course, is not necessary if it was done at the beginning of the meeting.

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. All minutes need to be mailed or emailed to all team members as soon as possible after the meeting.

Closing the Meeting: Establishing the Communication and Action Plans

Making Decisions

When the agreed-upon time approaches to end the meeting – *it's good to leave at least 10 minutes for this portion* – the chairperson will need to draw discussions to a conclusion and invite the team to summarize the key insights that emerged during the meeting. Give all team members an opportunity to say what they believe were the most important moments of the meeting. This will create a sense of clarity and is an important step towards building unity of purpose as the team makes decisions to close the meeting.

Some decisions may have been made during the agenda discussions and should be restated clearly and in bullet form. Other decisions may emerge as team members share about the most important moments of the meeting.

Moving from Decisions to Communication and Action

What will the team members tell other people about what happened at the meeting? The only way to answer that is to clarify what the members really want to tell and then that needs to be put into a plan. After the team has discussed the most important moments of the meeting, they will then develop the communication plan that has the following components:

1. What are we going to tell others?
2. Whom will we tell? Are there some who need to know sooner than others?
3. What part of the telling is the responsibility of every team member?
4. What part of the telling needs to be reserved to the chair or facilitator or another member of the team?
5. What channels will we use to communicate the message? Website? Social Media? Public Speaking? One-to-One Conversations? Emails? Texts? Newsletter? Bulletin Board? Church Street Sign? Other?

All tasks that need to be accomplished before the next meeting should be assigned to team 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. Team leaders can encourage team members to keep talking to each other between team meetings to build a sense of teamwork and to hold each other accountable. Accountability is best when it is shared. It's not just the job of the team leader.

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. Doing what we say we will do is how we build trust. Neglecting to do what we say we will do signals to others that we are 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 goes 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. Team 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 team.

A Note on Technology

The technology available for meetings is a great blessing of living in the 21st century. Using technology such as PowerPoint during face-to-face meetings can help add additional learning capacity for participants who are visual learners. Adding computer speakers to your laptop to enhance sound clips or videos that you use during the meeting creates a richer experience for everyone. 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. Google is a great friend to meeting facilitators and other team members.

Another important option for the 21st century church team 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 and practices outlined in this essay are 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 reluctant 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.

Some leaders will use conference calls for simple and short check-in meetings between the longer face-to-face meetings. Check-in meetings should be less formal and much shorter than regular meetings. Team members will appreciate the convenience of such meetings.

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. Your reputation for caring and effective meetings will spread, and people will be more willing to attend the meetings you call.

Resources for Further Learning

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

www.effectivemeetings.com

https://beta.doodle.com/

http://www.smartmeetings.com/technology/85839/7-must-have-meeting-planning-apps

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/