

# Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today*

*Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### Planning Effective Meetings

#### In a Nutshell

Principals, like most executives, spend lots of time in meetings. A recent study found that middle managers spend about 35% of their time in meetings (Dockweiler, 2013). District level administrators spend more time, close to 50% of their time in meetings. The same study found that 15% of the collective time of everyone in an organization is spent in meetings, a number that's increased every year since 2008. Besides the amount of time devoted to meetings, executives report that 67% of the meetings they attend are failures. That is they are unproductive, fail to engage participants and lack planning and structure.

If you are like most of the principals we work with, you spend more time than you would like in meetings. And much of that time may have been unproductive. At a recent TED talk Emily Pidgeon (2014) reported that 9 out of 10 people daydream at meetings, 25% of meetings deal with irrelevant issues, 73% of people do other work and 75% of leaders have received no training or information on how to conduct a meeting.

When you are conducting a meeting, you always want participants to feel that it was a successful, productive meeting. The evidence is that successful meetings are thoughtfully planned and implemented, always have a clear purpose, and actively engage participants.

Meetings have such a bad reputation, that Patrick Lencioni, author of *Death By Meeting (2004)*, says that meetings are one of the top-ranked reasons that executives complain about their jobs. For most executives, including school leaders, saying "I'd like this job if it weren't for the meetings," is like a surgeon saying, "this is a good job except for the operations," or a conductor saying, "I'd love this work except for the concerts." For educational leaders, meetings aren't just part of the job, they often are the job. It's the place where goals are set, plans are made, and things get done. Why, then, when meetings are so critical to our success, are they so universally vilified?

According to most organizational development research, people hate meetings because they are so bad – badly planned, badly organized, and badly run. Fortunately, the ways to fix bad meetings are clear, concrete, and easy to manage, as long as school leaders invest a bit of time in this very important leadership tool.

Meetings are expensive. They cost, time, money and energy that can be directed to other leadership functions. If they are not used wisely, the result is wasted resources, angry staff members, and lost opportunities for real school improvement.

#### Effective Meetings

According to virtually all of the research on meetings, productive meetings share several key features:

**A Clear Purpose** - Meetings should never be used to deliver announcements that can be provided in other ways – through email other networking technology. Every meeting should have a purpose, and the leader should be able to state it clearly. Before scheduling a meeting, the principal should fill in the following blank: "the purpose of this meeting is to \_\_\_\_\_." Unless that purpose calls for face-to-face contact, there is no reason to have a meeting.

**A Clear Agenda** - The agenda not only identifies the topics to be considered, but, in the most sophisticated settings, the desired outcome and the time allocated for the topic. For example, the agenda item "New Technology for Classrooms" might list the outcome as "Information from the IT Department" and "30 minutes" as a reasonable time allocation. This establishes a clear expectation that the agenda item is an information session and that it will have a clear time limit. Other outcomes might include a "decision" on a new program or "discussion" of a school-wide problem or issue.

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**Engaging Activity** - Meetings don't have to be circuses, but they do have to engage participants in thought, discussion, or other activity. Since faculty meetings typically occur at the end of a long teaching day, developing engaging activities is particularly important in schools. And be sure to provide a way to hear every voice. Too often a few people dominate the conversation and limit other voices. The tools designed by the National School Reform Faculty (<http://www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z>) provide options for inclusive conversation.

**Refreshments** - It may sound trite, but in our culture, congenial gatherings are often associated with food and beverages. While refreshments should not be the reason for meeting, unless it's an end-of-year celebration of some kind, healthy, high-energy nourishment will actually improve productivity in meetings.

## Always Begin With Norms

A crucial part of any effective meeting is having a set of meeting standards or operational norms. This includes basic decisions like seating arrangements. If you want an open discussion, arrange for participants to face each other, perhaps around a table or in a semicircle rather than in rows. Set a firm start and end time, and stick to them. This shows that you respect the participants' time. If the meeting is lengthy, plan for a break, but again, set a time and adhere to that. Be sure that any speaker knows his or her allocated time and stays within those parameters.

As you prepare for a meeting ask yourself, "How will we maintain our group memory of discussion and decisions?" Do you want to use charts posted visibly in the room, or will you have someone record notes? Technology can help with this task. You might even consider recording the meeting. A public recording provides visual clues and makes accountability easier.

What are the guidelines for discussion? Use of a "parking lot," which is simply a poster in the room, can be helpful. Participants are given sticky notes, and if they have a question or discussion item that is off the topic, they write it on a note and post it in the parking lot. You can revisit those items at the end of the meeting if there is time, or you can discuss them individually or at another time.

A favorite site for productive meeting tools is the National School Reform Faculty (<http://www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z>) mentioned earlier. There are a variety of tools to design engaging collaboration and successful meetings.

It's also important to model collaborative discussion. Allowing adequate wait time in response to questions, asking open-ended questions, and giving everyone a chance to speak are the foundational elements of a collaborative discussion. Garmston and Wellman (2013) describe seven norms of collaboration that are helpful as you facilitate discussions. Many schools have an established set of norms that they post and revisit prior to every meeting.

## Seven Norms of Collaboration

- **Pausing:** Pausing before responding or asking a question allows time for thinking and enhances dialogue, discussion and decision making.
- **Paraphrasing:** Using a paraphrase starter that is comfortable for you, such as "As you are . . ." or "You're thinking . . .," and following the starter with a paraphrase assists members of the group to hear and understand each other as they formulate decisions.
- **Probing:** Using gentle open-ended probes or inquiries such as, "Please say more . . ." or "I'm curious about . . ." or "I'd like to hear more about . . ." or "Then, are you saying . . .?" increases the clarity and precision of the group's thinking.
- **Putting ideas on the table:** Ideas are the heart of a meaningful dialogue. Label the intention of your comments. For example, you might say, "Here is one idea . . ." or "One thought I have is . . ." or "Here is a possible approach . . ."
- **Paying attention to self and others:** Meaningful dialogue is facilitated when each group member is conscious of self and of others and is aware of not only what he or she is saying but also how it is said and how others are responding. This includes paying attention to learning style when planning for, facilitating, and participating in meetings.
- **Presuming positive intentions:** Assuming that others' intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and eliminates unintentional put-downs. Using positive intentions in your speech is one manifestation of this norm.
- **Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry:** Pursuing and maintaining a balance between advocating a position and inquiring about one's own and others' positions assists the group to become a learning organization.

*Source: Garmston & Wellman (2013).*

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## **Critical Meeting Planning Questions**

Before scheduling a meeting, consider these questions.

### **What Is the Purpose of the Meeting?**

You may be thinking, “Of course I need to be clear about the purpose. Who doesn’t do that?” But we’ve been to far too many meetings where the purpose was unclear, unstated, or unknown. Think about it this way: Are you conducting a meeting in order to discuss and identify options and alternatives for a situation, or is the end result to make a decision? If you want to bring together a group of stakeholders to gather input, that is okay, but if they believe they are meeting to make a decision, then your meeting may begin with a conflict and be less productive.

### **Is the Meeting Really Necessary?**

Consider whether a meeting is necessary or if there might be a better way to accomplish the goal? Might a smaller meeting work just as well? Might a small group bring an idea or recommendation to a larger group? Finally, is there a clear need or is this a meeting that has just become part of the school or district’s routine. Ritual meetings are often unproductive because they lack clear focus.

### **What Is Being Decided?**

It’s also important for participants to have a clear idea of what is to be discussed. The agenda may be developed collaboratively, but plan for that in advance. An agenda can also help you budget your time appropriately, so everything is discussed. As you plan, ask yourself, “By the end of the meeting, will participants have the information they need to make a decision on the issue?” You might also consider whether your agenda allows for adequate discussion to inform the decision.

### **Do We Have the Information and Resources We Need?**

There is no point in discussing a topic or trying to make a decision if all the information is not available. Similarly, it is not possible to develop strategies and solutions unless everyone knows what resources are available to the group to solve the problem. Everyone should have access to the same resources and information to avoid any appearance of “stacking the deck.”

### **Who Decides?**

Prior to the meeting, determine how decisions will be made. Is the group to make a decision or is it to make a recommendation or to study the issue. For example, will the decision be made by the principal alone or by the principal with input? Perhaps the goal is for the decision to be made by the administrator with staff consensus or by the staff with administrative input. Or the decision may be made by the staff using consensus or by majority vote. Each strategy is appropriate for certain situations; however, participants need to clearly understand how decisions will be made prior to the meeting.

As you determine who will make the decision, also consider the timeline for the decision, and make that clear to participants. Finally, determine how the decision will be shared with or communicated to the larger school community.

## **Final Thoughts**

Meetings are such a routine part of any school that they are often taken for granted. Participants assume they will be dull, lack meaningful engagement, and consist of a compendium of announcements. In fact, that’s why many participants bring other things to do—papers to grade, smartphones or tablets for entertainment, or even knitting or newspapers. With thoughtful planning, meetings can be both engaging and productive and contribute to a positive school climate.

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## Resources

### Online Resources

**Organizing Staff Meetings Even YOU Want to Attend** (Delisio, 2009)

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin518.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin518.shtml)

**The Economic Impact of Bad Meetings** (Pidgeon, 2014)

<http://ideas.ted.com/the-economic-impact-of-bad-meetings/>

**How Much Time Do We Spend in Meetings?** (Dockweiler, 2013)

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-much-time-do-we-spend-in-meetings-hint-its-scary>

**Running Effective Meetings**

<https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/RunningMeetings.htm>

**Effective Meetings Produce Results: Before, During, and After** (Heathfield, 2016)

<https://www.thebalance.com/effective-meetings-produce-results-before-the-meeting-1918729>

**Why Meetings Kill Productivity** (Williams, 2012)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201204/why-meetings-kill-productivity>

**Planning and Preparing for Faculty Meetings** (Jennings, 2007)

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/107088/chapters/Planning-and-Preparing-for-Faculty-Meetings.aspx>

**Effective Instructional Time Use for School Leaders: Longitudinal Evidence from Observations of Principals**

(Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013) – *Educational Researcher*

<http://tinyurl.com/lb5zl2e>

### Print Resources

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (2013). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Jennings, M. (2007). *Leading effective meetings, teams, and work groups in districts and schools*. Alexandria, VA; ASCD. Available as an eBook.

Lencioni, P. (2004). *Death by meeting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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