

Meeting Navigation

How to Plan Engaging and Productive Meetings

By Sharon Swing



A friend once said to me, “Traveling is just one humiliation after another.” You probably have a traveling horror story coming to mind right now and most likely it includes delays, detours, circling, ending up at a different destination than what was intended, not having control over your circumstances.

But most of us spend more time being humiliated in boring and unproductive meetings. A few more stories probably come to mind on that topic, as well. Have you ever been in a meeting where it felt as though you were circling, without hope of landing where you intended?

Lack of execution and follow up after a meeting is like arriving at a grand destination and staying on the plane for the duration of the vacation, only to return to where you started. Sometimes we take a seat and settle in for a nap, knowing we’ll have no input on where we’ll end up.

If you participate in meetings that resemble any of these remarks, read on. If you are a manager or leader, or help to plan and facilitate meetings, you can make your meetings more productive and more interesting. Along the way, meetings might produce better ideas and more enthusiasm for action and accountability.

Common problems plague most meetings. Mainly, the group lacks a shared understanding of the starting point, the destination, or how to arrive there. Without a map, the members of the group are going to have differing opinions of the best or shortest route. Every meeting has a *purpose*, *agenda items* (the what) and a *process* for each agenda item (the how). The greater the disagreement or lack of clarity about these points, the more exasperating the meeting will be.

The reluctance to spend the needed time to plan a great

meeting, or the lack of knowledge of how to do so, are primary causes for unproductive outcomes and frustrated participants. If you can’t articulate a purpose, please don’t have a meeting!

Are We There Yet?

As a first step, let people know when they’ll be done and tell the group what needs to be accomplished. Complete this sentence: “By the end of this meeting, we will...” Completing this sentence will clearly articulate the meeting purpose. Consider where you are now, and where you need to arrive at the end of the meeting. Shorter meetings with a few meaty outcomes are better than long meetings with many unclear deliverables.

What’s Your Starting Point?

If a friend were to call you and ask for directions, what’s the first question you’d ask? How about, “Where are you now?”

Many meetings get off to a bad start because we assume the group is all up-to-date, remembering where the last conversation left off. When we start, we may be too far ahead, or even behind, where the conversation left off last time the group met. Some people are left out because of lack of context or current information, and some are bored by too much review.

To avoid this, determine the best way to assure all participants are together at the starting point of the conversation. A brief overview goes a long way, and don’t forget to consider emotional starting places. Participants’ emotions may vary from enthused, to resistant, scared, skeptical, willing or neutral. Think about what might put the group in the most productive frame of mind, planning an agenda item with that purpose in mind.

Every agenda can start with corporate or silent prayer, state-

Values to Help Navigate Meetings

As Christians, is there a way to honor God and our people in how we run our meetings? Absolutely! Respect, stewardship, wisdom and community are ideals that influence *what we do* and *how we do it* in meetings.

■ **Respect.** We are to be kind, gentle and respectful toward others. Each person in your meeting matters to God. They may not have the same authority or status in the organization, but they all matter deeply and equally to God. Making it clear to participants why they're there and how they're to interact shows respect for their ideas, position and time. Also, to listen is to show great respect, so treat each participant as an invited guest.

■ **Stewardship.** We are to make good, productive use of time, talents and resources. Well-run meetings steward people's time and can avoid wasting of talents, resources and implementation time.

■ **Wisdom.** In the abundance of counselors there is wisdom (Proverbs 15:22). God made people with amazing, creative differences, gifts and per-

spectives; working well within community produces wise choices and builds unity.

Would you consider leaving an empty chair that symbolizes God's presence with you in the room? Imagine Jesus sitting in the chair politely waiting to be asked his opinion. Christians in the room can be reminded to listen with their spirit for God's perspective. In fact, a facilitator can call for a few moments of silence when discussion gets tense, confusing, revealing, or there's a sense of divine guidance pending. Opening, closing or mid-meeting prayer can help people focus on what God wants and their job of seeking his will together.

■ **Community.** God intends for us to live and work in community because it can bring us joy, but also for the purpose of receiving feedback from one another. We can be self-centered and narrow-minded in our opinions if we don't have people around us who help us see other useful perspectives. View every meeting as a teambuilding opportunity!

ment of purpose, review of the larger context for the meeting, and if there is any question, telling people why they were invited to participate and what their roles are during or after the meeting.

Ask God to guide you in planning your agenda. He promises to give wisdom to those who ask for it (1 James 1:5).

What's Your Route?

Like a navigation system in a car, your agenda states the best route for you to choose to arrive at your destination. If people know and agree to the route before you start, it's more likely they'll allow you to lead them that way. Many meetings are painful because each person may have a different topic on the agenda that's his or her responsibility or passion—and they each came with something to say that can't seem to wait.

I once attended a meeting with numerous government and community service groups to decide if they would collectively host a festival in their town. No one was facilitating the meeting, and there was no agenda. The conversation

went 'circular' for two hours, and many of us felt frustrated and increasingly disinterested in the topic.

As an invited guest, I remained silent until someone asked what I thought. I simply said that it seems each group needs to state under what conditions they'd participate in the festival, then decide what kind of festival it might be, the location,

dates, responsibilities, etc. Once the agenda was set, we finished up in about 20 minutes, with all parties in agreement on a concept, assignments for the appropriate next steps, and with the future meeting's agenda, time and place set.

The lack of an agenda and a facilitator almost killed a great community event before it ever got started. The trust and cooperation that was built among those groups still benefit the community many years later.

Once you have the meeting's agenda posted on flip charts for all to see, if the conversation veers off track, the meeting facilitator can gently ask that a topic be held until later on the agenda. Moving on to the next item with a clear transition helps keep the group focused, following the conversation. It keeps people engaged when they know progress is being made.

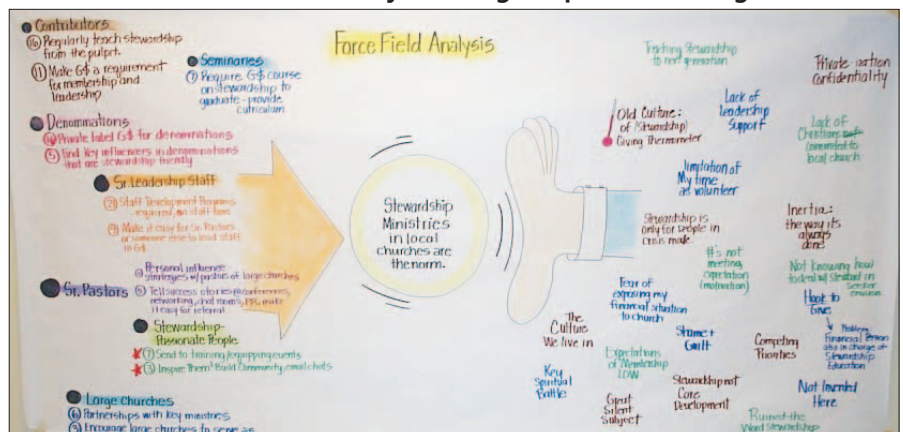
Be flexible in changing the agenda when the subject is complex and the ordering of topics requires some amount of random thinking.

Choose Modes of Transportation

Some destinations are best reached by a combination of planes, trains, automobiles, or on foot. In the same way, consider what combination of process will produce the best results for each item on your agenda. The person facilitating the meeting should not only write out the purpose and the agenda, but the best process for each agenda item.

Sometimes a presentation does the job, but other times structured brainstorming or open discussion may be most appropri-

A Force Field Analysis Using Graphic Recording



Graphic Recording documents a meeting in words and pictures as the conversation happens on large charts on the wall. This Force Field Analysis records on the left what will help make stewardship ministries in the local church the norm, and on the right, what will keep it from happening.

For a free, downloadable meeting planning worksheet and a follow-up worksheet, go to www.illumaxpartners.com and click on "free downloads." To receive free meeting worksheets, participate in a free tele-class or receive a free bi-monthly e-briefing on issues of faith and work, go to www.illumaxpartners.com.

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Book Review: Death by Meeting

By Larry Yonker

"Strategic planning is the key to warfare; to win, you need a lot of good counsel." —Proverbs 24:6, *The Message*

So, how do we acquire this wise counsel? We can go from person to person and interrupt what they're doing to ask for input, or call a meeting of people with the breadth of knowledge that will give us the highest probability of making the right decisions.

How many times have we lamented the thought of another meeting? As leaders, isn't it our job to build a team of highly skilled individuals? Aren't meetings supposed to be where we put our minds together to advance the ministry we're so passionate about? Why does it seem like we're always in meetings, and yet often leave feeling we never came to a decision?

Patrick Lencioni masterfully depicts most of our lives in his fable, *Death by Meeting*. Lencioni does an outstanding job of pointing out the missing components of a good meeting and showing us a simple formula that could make a radical difference in the organizations we serve, and improve the quality of our personal lives.

The two missing components are usually conflict and con-

text. As Christians, we somehow believe we must avoid conflict at all cost, yet conflict is the very thing that causes us to dig down to the root of the problem. Our general dislike of meetings causes us to try covering more topics than we can possibly do justice to, and thus lose the context for our meetings.

Lencioni suggests a structure that makes a lot of sense to me, defining four types of meetings:

- **Daily Check-in** (5 min.). Share daily activities. Don't sit down.
- **Weekly Tactical** (45-90 min.). Review (metrics and tactics). Don't set an agenda.
- **Monthly Strategic** (2-4 hours). Discuss, analyze and brainstorm one or two topics.
- **Quarterly Off-site** (1-2 days). Strategy, trends, key personnel, team development.

A great book that could have a radical impact in your life and ministry.

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