

EXAMINING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EFFECTIVELY MANAGING MEETINGS IN AN ORGANISATION

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1.0 Abstract

This paper examines the significance of effectively managing meetings in the context of a school. In order to keep track of the work progress, regular meetings can be conducted where team members share each other's development. The whole team is constantly updated with how well the project goes and what things need to be worked on. Another example is when there are changes in the school goals. The manager may call for a meeting to discuss the changes with the members so they are updated with any modifications. On the part of the management, conducting a meeting makes it easy for them to deliver any important updates at one time and at the same time to the members. Meetings also provide an opportunity for the management to acknowledge the accomplishments of group members through public recognition. Meetings also help group members to reach a common decision when urgent and crucial matters need to be discussed and brainstormed through personal interaction. Individuals must understand that meetings are very essential to the success of the organization. Although a meeting is an integral part of office routine and some may find it plain and boring in the long run, meetings go beyond achieving goals; they foster and strengthen good working relationships as well.

Key terms

Examine, effectiveness, managing, effective meetings, school

2.0 Introduction

School heads should see themselves as managers and should use their resources (people, money, property and time) effectively and efficiently to ensure that the school is and stays productive and profitable from an educational perspective (Quinn, 2004). Meetings are an essential practical aspect of running a school. Used as management tools they can be very beneficial but all too often they do not achieve the results intended. Holding effective meetings does not depend on intuition and good fortune but on effective management skills (Robbins and Boulter, 2002). The most common reason to have a meeting is to discuss something face to face. It could be a new idea, a new opportunity, a problem, to brainstorm something, reach a decision about something or any number of things (Schein, 1996). Nowadays, a lot of business communication is done via the phone, email, post, newsletters, company websites, intranets and extranets (Senah, 2004). These methods of communication have made life easier and communication quicker in a lot of respects (Kotler, 2002). They have opened up marketing possibilities. However, as Pfeffer and Gerald (2008) state, much as these methods are great, they still cannot replace a face to face meeting. Discussing something face to face allows one to not only hear what is being spoken, giving them access to clues hidden in the speaker's tone of voice, but it also allows one to see the speaker. The observation of body language and facial muscles is very important as it allows others to read the person's reaction to what they are saying as well as what they actually think about what themselves are saying.

3.0 Attitudes to meetings

The success of every meeting depends on the co-operation and support the chairperson receives from the participants. The chairperson should thus be fully aware of people's attitudes to meetings (Candoli, 1990). Amongst the many reasons people have for not liking meetings, the following have been found to be the most common:

Poor leadership: The leader does not keep the discussion on the subject and so fails to keep things moving in the appropriate direction and to engage those aspects of the discussion that are stimulating and motivating to members.

Goals are unclear: Members are not really sure what they are trying to accomplish.

Lack of commitment: Assignments are not taken seriously by committee members.

No clear focus: For example, 'What are we supposed to be doing today?'

Recommendations ignored: Management needs to be responsive to recommendations of a committee.

Inconclusive discussion: Problems are discussed but no conclusions are reached or decisions made.

Lack of follow-through: Members are not given assignments.

Domination: Often one person or clique dominates a meeting, talking and pushing for their positions while others wonder why they are there.

Lack of preparation: The agenda is not prepared and materials that really need to be there are not available. Someone has not done his or her home work.

Hidden agendas: Some participants may have personal axes to grind promoting discussions that only they think are important.

4.0 Factors that can make meetings effective

Clear definition of purpose: What the committee and its members are supposed to do and what their goals are is clearly set out.

Careful time control: Meetings start and end on time, with enough time allowed to get the work done and no more.

Opinions respected: Meetings' members listen and are sensitive to each other's needs and opinions.

Informal atmosphere: Participants are encouraged to contribute to the discussion when the atmosphere is informal rather than being a formal exchange.

Good preparation: Both chairperson and meeting members are well prepared, any materials required being available.

Commitment: The members are qualified and interested, wanting to be a part of the meeting.

No distractions: Interruptions are avoided or held to a minimum.

Record keeping: Good minutes or records are kept so that decisions are not lost. There is no need to search out what decisions were made at the last meeting.

Assessment of performance: Periodically, the meeting stops and assesses its own performance, with any necessary improvements being implemented.

Recognition of effort: Meeting members feel that they receive some kind of reward for their efforts, when their contributions are recognized and appreciated.

Management response: The work of the meeting is accepted and used, making a real contribution to the school.

5.0 Is a meeting needed?

How can a school head avoid holding meetings that frustrate people? Some attention must be given to designing meetings that are productive. The first decision to be made is whether a meeting is really necessary (Oakland, 1993).

6.0 Reasons for calling a staff meeting

It seems almost too obvious to mention that there needs to be a legitimate reason for holding a meeting. The design of the meeting depends on its purpose and what the hopes for outcomes are. Some legitimate reasons for having meetings are listed below. Legitimate purposes include:

- To share information
- To plan future programmes and actions
- To co-ordinate actions of individuals or units
- To solve problems, making a decision on a plan of action to deal with a problem
- To gather information, get feedback, review past actions
- To determine policy
- To motivate, inspire
- To train, instruct
- To provide support, build cohesion.

We often find school heads conduct meetings because it is required of them. We have meetings for 'meetings' sake. These can often be a waste of time and serve no purpose to the improved meeting was not legitimate. The following list provides some questionable purposes for meetings:

- It is required or expected
- It is scheduled
- To deal with individuals in a group setting
- To punish or reprimand
- To exert control
- To gain visibility – ego satisfaction.

Assuming there are legitimate reasons for holding a meeting, the next question to ask is: Is a meeting the best vehicle for accomplishing the objective. For example, if there is information that needs to be communicated, should one hold a communication meeting or would it be more efficient and effective to send out the information to all who need it via a memo or written document? The basic condition that determines if a meeting is needed centres on the question: Do people have to interact face to face to achieve the objectives desired? If the answer is yes, then a meeting is probably needed.

7.0 What type of meeting?

Meetings can take many different forms, from the more creative brain-storming techniques to formal school board meetings. Below you will find a brief summary of the different types of meetings you might employ as a school head (Hill and Jones, 2002).

Statutory: The law demands it, for example, directors' or councillors' meetings.

Managerial: Necessary to progress school affairs, for example, to inform of policy, to brief, to delegate tasks, to discuss problems, to reach group decisions, among others.

Creative: To generate ideas, to open up new possibilities or avenues of action, for example, to 'brainstorm' around the idea of what the school could design, manufacture; to produce an advertising slogan, or poster .

Negotiating: To reach a solution to a problem, for example, management and teachers' union to agree pay increases acceptable to two sides with different interests.

General /public: To report back to a group, for example, an Annual General Meeting of staff members or to air matters of membership meetings, public inquiries into public interest matters.

8.0 Participants' roles

In any meeting there are a number of defined roles. These are fairly common to most types of meetings.

The chairperson

The role of the chairperson is to:

- Co-ordinate the work of the committee
- Ensure that rules and procedures are kept to
- Run meetings so that all members have a chance to air their views
- Act as 'umpire' over disagreements, steering the meeting along avenues of decision-making
- Ensure that documents and records are efficiently kept
- Foster good will and working relationships among staff members
- Act as the meeting's leader and guide.

The secretary

The secretary's duties are to:

- Carry out the administrative work of the meeting

- Organise meetings and record the minutes
- Liaise with the chairperson regarding the general running of the meeting
- Keep meeting members and associated parties informed
- Act as the chairperson's right hand.

The treasurer

The role of the treasurer is to:

- Monitor the meeting's financial activities
- Record all its money transactions, submitting regular reports to the meeting as well as annual balance sheets
- Liaise with an external auditor who scrutinizes the books
- Advise the committee in matters of financial expenditure.

The committee member

Among the duties of the committee member are to:

- Participate at meetings and do the work delegated to him or her in the process of advising or decision-making.
- Attend meetings regularly, offering information, views and responses either by means of voting or making views known to the chairperson.
- Keep staff or interested parties he or she represents informed of the work the committee is doing and the decisions it has reached.

9.0 Organising and preparing meetings

The organisation of meetings involves a school head in a great deal of work. In order to ensure that no job is missed, it is a good plan to deal with matters systematically. A checklist is an invaluable aid. It can be conveniently divided up into jobs to do well in advance, the day before the meeting, the day of the meeting, during the meeting and after the meeting.

9.0 Special terms for meetings

Often one attends meetings and becomes totally confused by the terms used during the meeting. At times these terms are used deliberately to confuse the participants. Listed below you will find a list of common, and in some cases not so common, terms used during meetings. The list can be built on (Quinn, 2004).

Start your collection now!

Ad hoc	for the particular purpose of
Advisory	submitting suggestions or advice to a person or body entitled to carry out decisions and actions.
Agenda	a timetable listing items for discussion at a meeting
AGM	Annual General Meeting
Amendments	alterations usually taking one of the following three forms: addition, deletion or substitution; it must not be a direct negative
Apologies for Absence	written or orally delivered excuse for not being able to attend a meeting
Chairperson	co-ordinator of a committee, working part etc
Chairperson's Agenda	like an ordinary agenda but containing additional information for guidance
Collective Responsibility	all members abide by what the majority decides upon at a meeting
Constitution (also known as Standing Orders)	rules drawn up by an organization for determining the conduct of its business
Debate	a discussion on a motion, presented by a mover and a seconder (if there is one)
Executive	having power to act upon and carry out decisions
Ex officio	by reason of an existing office or post
Honorary	performing a duty without payment
Matters arising from the minutes	feedback, follow-up on action which has been taken to implement the decisions of the previous meeting

Minutes	written summary of a meeting's business
Motion	a topic formally introduced for discussion
Nem con	no-one disagreeing
Opposer	one who speaks against
Other business	items discussed outside main business of meeting
Proposer	one who speaks in favour of a motion
Quorum	the minimum number of people who must be present in order for the business of the meeting to be conducted. The number is laid down in the constitution. If too few are present at the start, the meeting cannot be declared open and it is post-poned.
Resolution	a decision reached after a vote at formal meeting – a motion successfully introduced.
Rider	an addition to a resolution after it has been passed
Seconder	a person who formally supports the proposer
Secretary	committee administrator
Sub-committee	a long-term committee appointed by the main committee to carry out a specific section of its work
Sine die	indefinitely
Standing committee	one which has an indefinite term of office
Treasurer	financial guardian
Unanimous	all of like mind
Voting	if the motion has been thoroughly / adequately debated and the meeting responds in favour of voting, then voting takes place

11.0 Summary

School heads spend a considerable amount of time attending or managing meetings, and therefore it is important that they use their time efficiently and effectively during these meetings. As a management tool, meetings can become an effective method of planning activities, informing staff members of activities, motivating a team spirit, co-ordinating activities, solving problems and building cohesion in the staff room and in the school in general. Thus, the need for effective meetings cannot be over emphasized.

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