

Meeting Management - Someone's Got to Do It

Thomas J. Shepstone, AICP

Meeting management demands some very practical skills. Among them are the ability to employ time effectively, prepare an agenda and use a gavel. Calling on individuals who are holding back is also important. Fairness is essential, but the goal has to be more than simple consensus, which can be a failure of leadership. Calling on those who disagree with you can be a good technique. Meeting leadership must be steady, strong and respectful of others. Some formality and ground rules are required, especially with large group meetings, but humor and perspective are also essential. Meeting management is about "keeping your head."

It would be difficult, I suppose, to pick a poorer subject to grab a reader's attention than an article on meeting management. Nevertheless, I'm going to plunge into this sea of boredom, this swamp (or should I, to be politically correct, say wetland) of tedium. Frankly, someone has to do it.

Who has not sat through a meeting that didn't deserve the honor of such a description? We've all been there. We've all had to endure those interminable discussions that result in less than nothing because the chair had no idea how to direct the meeting and let it be taken over by the participants. Those unable to be elected chairs themselves live for these opportunities. They finally get the stage and no one's there to shut them down.

Let's be honest - most meetings are a little that way. The bold dominate. If leadership doesn't come from the chair, it arises from the crowd. If the crowd manages the meeting, there is no meeting, only a gathering that either disintegrates or turns into a mob. It is far better, under such circumstances, to have not met at all.

So what does one do to manage a meeting? It would be easy to say that meeting management, simply put, is leadership. If leaders but exercised it, we might have no need for this discussion. It's not quite that simple though. The individuals chosen to chair meetings often end up there because no one else wanted the job. They may be natural born followers, but are selected to chair meetings because they're available and have no particular enemies. Or, they may be merely the next person in line. Or, they may have been excellent participants who have no idea how to run a meeting. Or, perhaps they're simply the hardest worker or largest contributor, but have no meeting management skills.

Given, the poor reasons why people with few, if any, meeting management skills so often end up chairing meetings, some practical advice is warranted. Unfortunately, little of it is to be found in professional circles. What I have learned I have gained by experiencing those deaths of a thousand cuts sitting through meetings that never really ended or dealing with hysterical audiences who viewed every exhibition of sound reasoning as a threat. You might, indeed, classify my advice, such as it is, as little more than street smarts. Nevertheless, I've learned some things along the way that you need to know. There are no excuses for bad meetings if you follow some simple rules.

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Watch the clock and make sure others see you watching it

The first thing I look for in a room where I'm expected to lead a meeting is the location of the clock. If your meeting place doesn't have one, see if you can find one to use. It's important. A wristwatch may have to do but is a poor substitute for a wall clock that everyone can watch together. Put the clock somewhere where you can see it easily but have to turn your head a little to do so. Don't worry if it's a little fast - that's a good thing.

A room without a clock is a home for endless discussion. All of us are our own favorite speakers, no matter how often, how forcefully or self-deceivingly we argue otherwise. Many meeting regulars are there for the entertainment and the social interaction. Others are actors. You can't give them a stage without setting a time for intermission. They aren't conscious of time. They're having fun or are so emotionally involved they forget time and everything else.

You need to bring time back and restore it to its glory by watching the clock. Let meeting participants know you're watching it. They need to understand time is very important to you. Those people who are attending the meeting out of necessity also need to know you recognize time is important to them. When you regularly turn your head to look at the clock you send a subtle but strong signal to all that the meeting will be timely.

You also provide yourself with an excuse to interrupt the chatter and remind everyone it is time to move along. They'll all appreciate it, even those you rudely cut off. You will also establish yourself as the meeting manager, because nothing is more important to meeting management than good use of time.

Use an agenda and stay on it

A piece of paper is a marvelous thing. **A written meeting agenda serves to focus discussion.** It provides a degree of formality that gives structure to an assembly. It serves as a distraction for the impatient meeting participants who are looking for something to do while waiting to speak. They can be engaged in making notes, a harmless activity that, unlike some other things they might do, won't disrupt your meeting. Most importantly, an agenda offers you the leverage you need to control events. "We need to resolve this item and move on, because there's a lot on our agenda this evening. Would someone care to make a motion?"

Use the agenda to control the tempo of your meeting. Make sure it's detailed enough to really guide discussion (6-8 items) but not so detailed that it's overwhelming. Go over it at the beginning of the meeting and let everyone know what to expect out of the meeting. **Establish a guaranteed adjournment time and put it on the agenda.** Your attendees will smile cynically the first time you do it, but when they see you mean it, they'll love you for it. That cynical smile will dissolve into an approving nod.

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Herd those cats, but don't be a dog

Every meeting can take unexpected turns; hence the “herding cats” analogy we often hear today. It is a rather accurate portrayal of what can happen, but responding in kind by chasing those cats all over the barn is more likely than not to lead to the dog’s unfortunate lesson of a painful scratch on the nose.

Somewhat better techniques are demanded if you want to avoid the pain. Let those cats meow a bit, but don’t be afraid to cut off extraneous discussion, summarize and move on. **Use a gavel - it works!** People respect the gavel, especially if you learn to use it sparingly and can really slam it when circumstances demand. No one expects it then. You can regain control of the meeting instantaneously. Simply having the gavel at hand to reach for is usually adequate to let a long-winded speaker know enough is enough, however. Learning when to reach, when to grab and when to slam is an art you’ll simply have to master with time. Just having a gavel on the table will help in the meantime. Try it!

You can also guide a meeting as chair, by **calling on individuals who are holding back**. Many do hold back, some out of meekness, others out of frustration and still others out of respect, but you need to bring them out into the discussion. You will learn, with experience, if you have not already, that intelligence is highly overrated by the intelligent. What’s really needed is wisdom. Every community and almost every group includes one or more sages who are hesitant to dominate discussion, but can always be called upon to offer such wisdom.

It’s not hard to identify the sages. They tend to sit in the middle of the room, usually try to encourage you with nods and facial expressions and often hold back speaking until they’ve heard others speak. Don’t confuse them with fence-riders, however. They are given to strong opinions, but are wise enough enough to wait for the right moment to express them. Call on these sages to get your meeting back on track. Defer to them when necessary. Most of all, remember the smartest person in the room is often the one who recognizes he’s not the most intelligent. He cleverly uses those who are more intelligent to make his points for him. If you can learn to recognize such sages and call on them judiciously, you’ll be the smartest person in the room and a good meeting manager.

Be fair, but don't forget to lead

A good meeting is fair to all who participate in it, but fairness doesn’t require consensus. Consensus can, indeed, be deceiving. It often confirms the lack of leadership. Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister known as the “Iron Lady” described consensus as “...abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies ... something in which no one believes and to which no one objects.” Her point is well-taken. What is desired is not a consensus where everyone surrenders something to arrive a compromise straddling collective opinions, but agreement obtained after one side convinces the other of the rightness of their position. That some of this may occur on both sides of the argument is likely, but seeking the middle-ground as a goal in itself

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only frustrates the search for the truth. Far better it is that all opinions get aired and clear judgments made, than a group capitulate to the temptation to make everyone happy.

This can only work, however, if those whose opinions are not accepted realize they were heard. They must know that it was their own failure to convince that led to the defeat of their position. This is easier than it sounds. Being fair is not that difficult. **Call on those who you know disagree with you.** Acknowledge their points and even help articulate them if necessary. Treat everyone with the same respect. Avoid direct argument - it's not your job as the meeting manager. Let others make the case while you clarify and illustrate where you can. Show your strength by admitting the weaknesses of your own arguments. Recognize the strengths of others where possible. But, never ever be afraid to express your own views in strong terms at the appropriate time, generally after others have first spoken. This is leadership - steady, strong and respectful of others.

Formality is necessary, but a laugh will often do as much good

Some formality is required of any meeting. There must be respect for the process of the meeting if it is to be manageable and accomplish anything at all. It has nothing to do with respect for you as the meeting manager, as some might mistakenly believe. Rather, it's all about maintaining the integrity of the institution. If no one believes in it, no one can be expected to accept the results. Therefore, some elemental rules are called for in running meetings where controversy and disagreement are expected.

Large public hearings and meetings can be particularly challenging, but I've found some simple guidelines accomplish wonders. First, **let no one speak twice until everyone who wants to speak has spoken once.** This will take the steam out of the impassioned actors and meeting dominators in the group.

Second, **make participants come to the front of the room to speak.** This tends to put manners on most (although not all) unruly people. No one wants to make a fool of themselves in front of an audience.

Third, **get their name, where they are from and who they are representing.** Many of the most cantankerous people at large meetings turn out to be "insurgents" from other areas who are merely there for the fun. Exposing them tends to unify those with legitimate interests.

Fourth, **make everyone address the chair or the board - allow NO banter among participants.** It is surprising how often otherwise good meeting managers let this happen, but it does happen. It can take place in a second unless quickly countered by an alert chairperson. Someone from the audience pops up with a question and the person speaking automatically wants to respond. Human beings have the innate bad habit of wanting to answer any question put to them. Good newspaper reporters understand this. You need to also, because it can lead to a heap of trouble in an instant. Audience banter is deadly. You must stop it immediately, from the very

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beginning, no matter how innocent. Tell your questioner that all questions go to the chair or board and don't let your speaker answer until and unless you want her or him to do so. Stay in control and make heavy use of your gavel if required.

It's useful, too, to **summarize at the end of every major discussion** to let everyone know they were heard. This encourages faith in your wisdom as the meeting manager. It discourages the temptation of others to jump in and take it over from you.

During the meeting **use a modest amount of humor to keep the meeting enjoyable** and deal with problem participants. A laugh will make everyone relax a bit. After all, a meeting is just a meeting and no more. It's seldom a matter of life and death. Interjecting some humor reminds people of that and restores perspective.

This is why **meeting management is the job of the chairperson and not advisors, staff or professionals**. Those types will take over your meeting if you let them. I know because I am one. I also know, however, that it's usually not a good idea, precisely because we approach these matters as a business or profession. We take ourselves way too seriously. Good meeting managers never do so. They recognize their limits, only call upon their advisors when necessary and aren't afraid to laugh a little.

It is in that spirit I offer the view of G. K. Chesterton, another Englishman, who said "I've searched all the parks in all the cities and found no statues of committees." Keep that observation in mind as you run every meeting. If you are smart enough to know the limits of a meeting, you will accomplish much. One might also bear in mind some of the best advice about dealing with others comes from still another Englishman, Rudyard Kipling, whose poem "If" says it all. You know it already. "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you..."