

Effective Meeting Strategies

The effectiveness of an organization's meetings can determine how successful an organization will become. Effective meetings allow the officers and the members discuss issues, take on responsibilities, and to report back on the progress of projects. It is through meetings that everyone can stay informed of what is happening.

To have a successful meeting, there needs to be a basic structure to it. A great meeting does not begin at the start time of the meeting but rather it begins during the preparatory work done to prepare for it. Planning ahead will keep meetings from becoming long-winded get-togethers where very little is accomplished. There are three essential stages to running a meeting listed below. Please click on the topic for more information.

Preparing for the Meeting:

First, your organization needs to decide who will be in charge of the meetings. This should be outlined in your constitution and it is normally the president. Sometimes, it is the responsibility of the secretary to create the agenda but the president leads the meeting. If this is the case, the president and the secretary need to work together so both know exactly what needs to be covered at the meeting.

Once your organization has a person designated as running the meeting, this person must do all of the preparatory work to ensure a successful meeting. The items to consider for preparation are as follows:

Agenda - Know what you want discussed at the meeting. This will keep the meeting focused and will clearly tell everyone when a topic will be discussed.

Speakers - Determine if anyone needs to report on a project. Contact anyone who you expect to speak and tell that individual what is expected so he/she can come prepared.

Space request - Check to see that you have a room reserved for the meeting. The master calendar can be accessed at www.winthrop.edu/mastercalendar.

Meeting set-up - Be sure that the room is conducive to the type of set up needed for the meeting. Do you want a lecture style, with one person up front, or do you want the participants arranged in a circle to facilitate discussion. Different meetings have different needs so make sure the room can accommodate your needs. Get to the meeting room early so you can set it up in the appropriate manner.

Materials - Have handouts, paper, pencils, pens or any other materials you may need prepared and ready beforehand. Do not assume that people will come prepared with pens or paper. Bring some extra materials with you.

Advertise - Let your members know when the meetings are. Put up flyers around campus to invite new members to join your organization and to participate in a meeting. You want

to give a minimum of one week's notice. Two weeks notice is ideal so people will be able to plan for the meeting and put it in their schedule. If your meeting occurs at the same time and day every month (i.e. every fourth Tuesday at 3:00 p.m.) send a reminder at least one week in advance.

Creating an Agenda:

Meetings do not have to be long, difficult, or a waste of time. A properly thought-out agenda shared in advance, makes all the difference. The agenda can determine whether a meeting will be focused and meaningful or whether it will be inefficient with people feeling it was not useful.

The agenda is the guide for the meeting. It lays out all of the information so participants in the meeting will know what their role is. It provides the framework that the meeting will be built upon.

To create an agenda, identify a list of items that will be necessary to achieve the goals for the meeting. You may want to seek out suggestions and input from other people, especially the officers. Look at the minutes from a previous meeting and see if there is any unfinished business that needs to be resolved.

Once you have identified what needs to be discussed at the meeting, you will need to organize all the items. There is no one set formula for an agenda and it can be done in many ways.

Here are four tips for sequencing items effectively:

- Start with the most important items, allowing the participants to make critical decisions when their interest and energy are at their highest level.
- Handle short, urgent items first so they aren't crowded out and become continuous "unfinished business" items.
- Concentrate on fewer more important items.
- Keep items in a logical order.

Next to each item on the agenda, you will write down the person responsible for leading on that item. If you are discussing the budget, you will write the treasurer's name next to that item so everyone knows who will be discussing it. You may also want to put an estimated time length like ten minutes so people know there is a limit. If the 10-minute limit is reached, meeting participants can vote to extend the discussion time. If they vote not to extend discussion, then the meeting continues on to the next item on the agenda.

Conducting the Meeting:

Now, that you have prepared for the meeting, notified everyone that it is happening, you need to facilitate it in a manner that keeps everyone focused and on task.

The following is a list of suggestions on how to conduct the meeting:

A. Start the meetings on time: Do not wait for stragglers. Begin with the people who are there. If you wait for stragglers, the people who come on time will start coming late because they know the meeting will start late. Do not make people feel as if they are wasting their time.

B. Establish ground rules and guidelines: Take a moment to explain how the meeting will run, especially if a lot of new people are present. Make sure everyone knows that they can express their opinion when it is appropriate to do so.

C. Follow the agenda: Keep everyone focused on the agenda. If someone brings up an unrelated issue while discussing an item, refer that issue to the appropriate time on the agenda and continue the discussion on the current topic.

D. Monitor time: Keep track of the time spent on an item. Depending on what is being discussed and if it is taking a lot of time to work through, it can either be moved to a vote at the meeting so a decision is reached immediately, or you might want to empower someone or a few people to discuss the issue in more detail and come back with a report that will be reviewed at the next meeting. Do not let discussion drag on endlessly. This is a delicate balancing act. You want people to discuss issues, but you do not want one issue to take up the whole meeting. Finding the right length of time for discussion will vary based on topic, need, and other factors. You will learn in time when it is appropriate to allow discussion to continue and when to push for the discussion to be ended.

E. Ensure participation: Try to hear everyone's input. Encourage people who are quiet to give their opinions and ideas. Do not let the meeting be dominated by one or two people.

F. Secretary's role: Your secretary should be taking minutes. If there is a question about what has transpired at the meeting, the secretary can look back and respond to any questions. The secretary will also help the president keep track of all the information produced at the meeting. Ideas and people's commitments should be recorded.

G. Assign task when needed: When people take on a responsibility check to see that they understand what they are supposed to do. The secretary should write down who took on what projects. After the meeting, you will want to follow up with those individuals to ensure that they are moving forward on their commitments.

H. Summarize key decisions and actions: At the end of the meeting, you should review what has transpired. You will review who has taken on new tasks and what decisions have been made. This helps to make sure that everyone understands what happened at the meeting.

Evaluating the Meeting:

After you have completed the meeting, it is a good idea to evaluate its effectiveness. You want to get the input of your fellow officers, and if possible talk to some of the participants to get their opinions.

To improve the meetings, it is necessary for you to be open to compliments and criticisms. You want people to be honest about their feelings and perceptions. Do not feel that you need to defend how you conducted the meeting; just allow people the time to express their view.

After hearing different opinions, you want to consider those views as compared to how you felt the meeting went. Is there room for improvement? What could have made the meeting run more smoothly? Did the group stay focused and on task.

To help you with evaluating a meeting, there is a evaluation form you can pick up from the Office for Clubs and Organizations to help you. We all have areas where we need to improve on, so be honest, and take the necessary action to make your meetings even better.