

**“USING MEETINGS TO CREATE COHESION: “WE’VE GOT TO STOP MEETING LIKE THIS!” Chapter in Deryl Leming, ed. Managing People: A Guide for Department Chairs and Deans. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 2003**

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Early in my career, when I chaired a “committee on committees,” little did I imagine that meetings would become a life-long professional obligation. I don’t even like meetings. But fate wasn’t going to permit me to avoid them.

Since the early 1970’s this Woman of La Mancha has been throwing spears at academe’s meeting practices, pleading in workshops or in practice for better ways to accomplish results in groups (North).

Some campus personnel can duck the call for service in local or campus committees, but one’s own department meetings always loom. In addition to all the problems associated with meetings in general, department meetings sometimes feature senior colleagues who huff and puff and threaten to “blow away” junior colleagues, as well as the chair. I know several chairs who are routinely nauseated the morning of department meetings, anticipating public humiliation at worst and wasting people’s time at best. Intimidating meetings have kept more than one new faculty member from peeping one word in their first year. Misunderstandings from meetings have been known to incubate factions with long lives and boredom from meetings has glazed over generations of academicians’ eyes. Yet, a successful meeting or exciting retreat can produce both new directions and renewed collegiality. Department heads (and deans) interested in improving their people management skills can hardly overlook the conduct of effective meetings.

What makes meetings so difficult? 1) Discussion protocols seem to have only two variations: endless talk or Robert’s Rules; the different purposes for meetings are not always well served by either end of that continuum. We need to use a greater variety of discussion and decision-making tools, especially tools that promote participant satisfaction. 2) Meetings suffer the same A-Z ailments of any human-to-human interaction: listening blocks, power differentials, clouded clarity, differing styles, hostility, hidden agendas. Meetings amplify the pitfalls. And yet, we expect the chair to monitor all of this, serve as referee, psychologist, mother, tiger-tamer while at the same time trying to follow and focus the discussion. Chairs need help steering through interpersonal mine fields during meetings, especially if they want to both achieve results and promote departmental cohesion. 3) Meetings are doomed for failure when we squeeze complex issues into our 50-minute free classroom periods, like Cinderella’s sisters with her glass shoe. Instead, meetings should be structured to fit their purpose; form should follow function.

Today, books on how to improve meetings provide many new tools and insights for department chairs and deans (see for example Mosvick & Nelson and Hammond). In this chapter, I will suggest looking differently at three aspects of meetings: discussions/making decisions, leadership roles, and the structure of meetings

## Shaping Discussions

In 1876 when American Army General Henry Robert wrote "The Rules of Order," he attempted to bring order to the chaos that must have characterized meetings of his day by making parliamentary procedures available in print form. Today we still have the same options: unregulated discussion or formal parliamentary procedure. While there may be times when free-flowing discussion is warranted, often department members long for their meetings to carve out decisions from the endless goo of discussion. Likewise, there may be reasons for using formal parliamentary procedures in department meetings, but those rules may not necessarily foster department inclusion, cohesion, and collegiality.

Since Robert's era, advances have been made in group dynamics that can provide new insights and additional structures for moderating the discussion and coming to conclusions ([www.agric.gov.ab.ca/ruraldev/rurallea/r2tps2.html](http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/ruraldev/rurallea/r2tps2.html)). Many of these structures pay particular attention to promoting good group dynamics, which can lead to better department cohesion. The structures suggested below are a sampling of many possible ways to lasso group opinions and provide wider group participation in meetings without reverting to the more formal Robert's Rules.

### 1. Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq)

Nominal group technique (NGT) was developed in the early 1970's to bring a group together to reach conclusions in a different kind of way. NGT is organized so that think time is balanced with talk time; so that all individuals contribute, not just those comfortable with talking in groups; and so that a wide variety of ideas can be displayed. See <http://128.143.238.20/services/CSA/nominal.htm>. This approach is more structured than brain storming and more participative than voting. The NGT steps I use, slightly adapted from the original, follow.

1) State a question or issue and ask the group members to work alone by writing their own responses in phrases. Topics that might be appropriate for this technique include: "What directions might our department take in the next five years?" or "How can we reduce credits to degree?" 2) After 3-5 minutes, record the ideas, one idea per person at a time, on a large flip chart or board. No discussion or evaluation of the ideas should occur during this step.

3) Lead the group in discussing the ideas one at a time, especially for clarification. Often, groups will eliminate duplication or cluster ideas.

4) Assign group members a certain number of "points" and ask them to come up to the board (in any order or no order) to divide those points among the ideas they like the most, with no limit on how many points can be assigned to any one item. The number of points each person is given to allocate depends on the size of the group; I suggest about two to three times the number of participants, so for a group of 10 participants, each individual might have 25 points to divide.

5) Tally the results and encourage group discussion of the findings. If the group desires, refine the answers and distribute points one more time.

There are many variations on this overall design, but the essential elements are: silent generation of ideas that are displayed for all to see; distribution of preference points; and discussion of results (Hammons & Murry). I have used this technique for small groups, mid-sized groups of 30, and large groups of 80 or so. With large groups, a team of group leaders makes the process more efficient.

## 2. Inventing Criteria (Merry and Allerhand)

This technique helps a group choose among options by directing the group's attention to the most important criteria the options might meet. For instance, a physical education department might consider expanding by creating new programs in adventure education or athletic training or adaptive physical education. Using this process, the department would first identify criteria that would be important to the decision, such as student interest, adequate staffing, needed facilities. Then the options could be examined according to each criterion. Because the focus moves from the options themselves to the decision criteria, the technique can often diffuse arguments for and against specific options. Other typical issues, which might suit this technique, are: "Which classroom should be renovated first?" or "Which proposal(s) for professional development should be funded?" Here is how the technique works.

1. List options on a board or flip chart in a matrix design, similar to the one shown below.
2. The group identifies criteria by which the ideas should be judged and lists them on the matrix. If some are more important than others are, they should be so noted.
3. *Each individual rates each idea by each criterion, using high-medium-low or a numerical system to show how well each idea is supported by each criterion. Summarize the individual "votes" into summary votes for each box.*
4. Discuss the results.

Figure 2: CRITERIA MATRIX SHEET

	Facilities	Funding	Staffing Most Impt	Student Need	Timing	Etc.
Adventure Ed	High	Medium	Low	High	High	
Athletic Training	High	Low	Low	?	?	
Adaptive Physical Ed	High	High	High	High	High	
Option D	Etc.					
Option E						
Option F						
Etc.						

Source: Merry and Allerhand (1977).

In this example, the adaptive Physical Education option meets criteria better than the other options, especially since it meets what was identified as the most important option-staffing.

Structuring discussion with these or other techniques (such as brainstorming) forces the visual display of individual thoughts so that the group gains a tangible picture of its collective opinions at the moment. While this may seem a small matter, it provides group members with the assurance that each person, no matter how shy or low on the power totem, contributed; that domination is diminished or eliminated altogether; that the discussion will not be funneled into an adversarial yes or no vote; that the “collective” is addressing collective issues. In other words, structuring discussions contributes to the group feeling like a connected group.

Structuring discussion also promotes efficiency by reducing time wasted in meetings. Most structured discussion processes provide a limit on general discussion by directing the group to some form of visual display of opinions. This governor for discussion generally eliminates soliloquies and filibusters, as discourages verbal domination, which take up so much time in many meetings.

And, sometimes the variety provided by structured discussion processes actually makes meetings seem like fun.

### **Shaping Leadership Roles**

All too often, the responsibility for achieving results in meetings falls on the backs of the chairs (or deans or other conveners). Meeting members watch (with curiosity, amusement, or fear) to see if h/she can pull it off—this time. I find it perplexing in our democratic society to observe how often meeting members expect the authority of the meeting convener to make the meeting work. And so the convener juggles all the tasks associated with getting people to agree, with getting things done in time, with ensuring full participation, and with making arrangements. These multiple tasks stretch the abilities of even the best convener to attend to content, process and arrangements at the same time, thus risking the meeting’s success. The-chair-does-all model masks the members’ individual responsibility for the success of the meeting, taking them off the hook. To get the best out of meetings, different roles should be identified and assigned to various members. Many departments already recognize the value of separating meeting roles when they appoint or enlist someone to assume the recording role.

Perhaps the most obvious role differentiation required for productive meetings is that between a) getting the tasks accomplished and b) assuring that the members have a positive experience. While not completely opposite objectives, the two goals can lead in very different directions. The *task* orientation focuses on speedy completion without much leeway for contemplating participation patterns. The *group* orientation considers on the needs of individuals in the group even if the task doesn’t get accomplished in a speedy manner. Often chairs concern themselves with completing the tasks at hand at the expense of group participation and satisfaction. All too often departments that do not give some special attention to both process and participation receive negative reactions to meetings:

Too frequently people’s reactions to most meetings are disappointment and frustration. Disappointment that tasks weren’t completed. Frustration that

the potential benefits of any group...were effectively negated by one or more problems such as: domination by one or two members, failure to tap the talents of group members, a pervasive sense of having been manipulated, pressure for conformity to pre-determined answers/solutions (Hammons and Murray, p. 10).

I suggest that four different people in meetings assume four different roles: organizer, completer, facilitator, and recorder.

1. Organizer. The Organizer, usually the chair, handles the agenda, logistics, and details. Normally, the Organizer leads the meeting. The Organizer might also confer with the Completer and Facilitator in planning the meeting with both efficiency and satisfaction in mind.

Because the Organizer is usually the power figure—department chair or dean or director--the Organizer is the only one who can build a permissive climate for the group to fully participate, without which none of the remaining suggestions make sense (Mosvick & Nelson, p. 122). A chair who dominates meetings or who tolerates only agreement might be better served conducting meetings in front of his or her bathroom mirror.

2. Completer. The Completer's focus is helping or nudging the group to accomplish the tasks at hand. This person pushes for conclusions and uses a variety of techniques to urge the group to finish its task. This person might summarize where the group is in the discussion by listing the things already decided and what still lies ahead. This person might note when the group has strayed from the agenda or ask to separate issues. The Completer could suggest a straw vote or a new decision making technique or recommend that a sub-group to make recommendations on an issue. The Completer role is difficult because it requires great concentration both on the topic under discussion and on the flow of the conversation.

3. Facilitator. The Facilitator's focus is to insure the positive involvement of the group. The Facilitator tries to assure that all members contribute to discussions and that people hear each other. In addition, the Facilitator serves as a champion of each person and watches for opportunities to celebrate individual and group successes. The facilitator seeks to build and reinforce a sense of community. Humor can be an effective tool for a Facilitator. The Facilitator can help the Organizer by suggesting meeting designs that open participation and by helping to curtail the natural tendency of the Organizer to do most of the talking. This difficult role requires concentration not only on the meeting topics but also on interpersonal nuances and patterns of participation.

4. Recorder. The Recorder produces a record of the group's conclusions. The Recorder is often an ally of the Completer, attempting to make sense of the flow of the discussion. The Recorder can play a unifying role by keeping track of conclusions or options or discussions on a visible board, so that all members can watch their progress; all eyes on one set of notes reminds the group of their collective purpose. The use of visual recording devices (white or black boards or flip charts) makes ideas common property and removes the association with the person originating the idea. It also recognizes that the idea was "received" by the group. Without this public recording, often ideas just hang in the air, neither accepted nor rejected.

Details about how these roles might be implemented will vary, but factors a group will want to consider include: how people are chosen for the roles, how long a person serves in the role, what kinds of resources/training might be available for those new in the roles.

As group members serve in one or more of the roles, their sense of responsibility for the group grows; group perceptions of one another broadens; and individuals can experience themselves in new ways within the sociology of the department. With this shared leadership for the collective business of the group, the role of the chair becomes less lonely and formidable as the diffused light replaces the spotlight on the chair.

### **Shaping the Structure of Meetings**

With schedules as tight as they are, department chairs can become giddy isolating even one time period when all members are free to attend department meetings. So it comes as no surprise that department meetings are usually held at the same time and are of the same duration, format, and in the same place. And yet, the tasks for meetings can vary from simple announcements to complex problem solving, leading inevitably to wasting time on the one hand (discussion expands to fill the time allotted) or inadequately addressing larger problems on the other. Careful thought about shaping the structure of meetings can produce better results, combat boredom, and influence collegiality.

1. Organize meetings so that form follows function. Meet only when topics suggest that exchange is desirable, not merely to make announcements. Vary the time of the meetings if possible, scheduling half or full day retreats for elaborate or lengthy issues and 16 or 23 minute meetings for briefer items.
2. Take the "temperature" of the group regarding their opinions on how well the meetings are working (Nikola). Use a continuum from 1-16 to ask members where they think recent meetings rate on producing results or encouraging collegiality or using time well. Do these evaluations on paper or on a board at least annually. The follow up to the rating should be a question about how the group could improve the meetings.
3. Spice up meetings with creative use of space. Space is a powerful symbolic tool, which can be used to increase departmental cohesion and to make department meetings more pleasant. Rooms where seats are arranged in lecture style tend to inhibit colleague-to-colleague discussion and encourage a more formal talking arrangement in which everyone talks to the chair. Sometimes using different rooms helps mix up the normal seating patterns and therefore breaks up a predictable response pattern. Going off campus to a retreat setting often helps members shed traditional distances from each other and work on problems with new perspectives.
4. Vary the structure of the agenda, shifting traditional topics around. If subcommittees normally report first and then the group goes to new business, reverse them on occasion.
5. Try using a fish bowl design for the work of an important committee. In a fish bowl design, the committee meets in a circle in the center of a room with one extra chair. Observers sit in chairs around the inner circle to listen to the discussion. If an

observer wishes to join the committee's discussion he or she moves to the extra seat in the inner circle to join the discussion and leaves when finished.

6. Occasionally, arrange for food to be available before, during or after departmental meetings. Food heightens the congeniality of the group, sometimes breaks tensions, and increases attendance.

## **Conclusions**

Academic institutions, more than any other type of organization, should be on the forefront of being really proficient at encouraging, monitoring, and using group discussion on issues. Our meetings should be wonders to behold.

But, all too often we take meetings for granted, assuming that no special efforts or skills are necessary for a group to sit together, talk and make decisions. However, like parenting or teaching, participating in a meeting, especially a department meeting, is a complex human interaction with multiple goals, histories, and personalities; with an intricate sub-text; and high stakes attached to success or failure.

Meetings are the *one* place in which all members of the group interact, establish their collective norms, and create their collective identity. Meetings provide flagship opportunities to create positive experiences. And yet, all too often meetings at their worst spawn a gang mentality or cover over honest disputes with a thick film of melted sugar.

Department meetings are like meals in a family, times that the group convenes as a unit. Like a dinner setting, department meetings can be nightmarish experiences or they can establish and reinforce group norms that promote group cohesion. Like dinners, they take some planning, concentration, and effort to achieve the best results. Let's be as creative, organized, and determined about our meetings as we are about our teaching. Bon Appetite!

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