



Running Effective Meetings

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- ◆ **BUILD AN AGENDA TO GUIDE ACTION.** To be helpful, an agenda needs to be more than a mere listing of topics – it needs to be an intelligent guide to participating in and leading the meeting. For each item on a given meeting agenda, it is important to identify what corresponding actions need to be accomplished by the meeting participants. Types of actions required by the group for different agenda items may include:
 - ◆ *Decision required*, for those areas in which the group has decision-making authority
 - ◆ *Recommendation needed*, for items about which another group will make decisions, based on input from the meeting attendees
 - ◆ *Input needed*, on items about which one group member is requesting ideas to inform a decision that s/he will make
 - ◆ *Information sharing*, for items that only require for group members to be informed. (Conventional wisdom is to keep information-sharing items to a minimum in meetings, and use email as a way to share information.)

- ◆ **STAY ON POINT.** Related to the need for a solid agenda is the need for all members to take responsibility for keeping the meeting “on point” and focused on the agenda items that have been agreed to. Avoid becoming too enamored of conversational tangents. A “Parking Lot” (see below) is a very useful tool for keeping discussions on track.

- ◆ **USE A “PARKING LOT.”** A Parking Lot is nothing more than a place to record important items that come up in the course of a meeting and need to be dealt with at some point, but not at that moment. Post a piece of flip-chart paper on the wall, write the words “Parking Lot” across the top, and add items as needed as the meeting develops.

A Parking Lot protects the meeting’s agenda by acknowledging the importance of these topics, but not allowing them to hijack the meeting. Items placed in the Parking Lot must be addressed eventually, however, or members will come to feel that items consigned to the Parking Lot have actually just been “killed” for discussion. One technique is to spend the last 10 minutes of the meeting disposing of these items, either by making quick decisions if that course of action is appropriate or by identifying those items for formal inclusion in a future agenda.

- ◆ **TAKE QUICK POLLS.** Taking a quick poll of the members’ opinions by “whipping” around the group is an efficient way to gather information about the collective viewpoints and can dramatically shorten discussion time when it reveals unanimity. A



variation on this strategy is to “brainstorm” a number of items – for instance, potential partnerships to pursue – and then ask each member to identify the one or two they feel have the most potential.

- ◆ **RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU HAVE MADE A DECISION.** Shibley’s Law states, “When groups disagree, they’ll talk for 20 minutes. When they agree, they’ll talk for two hours.” A formal recognition that a decision has been made and a stating of what the decision is can reduce time spent reiterating and luxuriating in areas of agreement.

- ◆ **TAKE MEETING NOTES.** Notes provide a useful record of a meeting’s progress and of agreements made by members. Meeting notes are *not* minutes, which strive to record every element of conversation and are so extensive as to frequently be of little use. Notes from a meeting should occupy one side of a sheet of paper and include:
 - ◆ The meeting date and attendees
 - ◆ Items discussed
 - ◆ Decisions made
 - ◆ Actions agreed to and responsible person(s)
 - ◆ Items for the next meeting, frequently drawn from the Parking Lot

- ◆ **USE A FLIP CHART.** A posted flip chart containing the agenda items provides a shared visual focus for the group, keeping conversations on track. When possible, graphic representations of ideas can contribute to the group’s understanding of complex concepts.

- ◆ **“DO YOU HAVE A SUGGESTION?”** When someone is critical of an approach or idea raised in a meeting, a very effective technique is to ask that person to contribute to the solution by asking for his or her suggestion. Equally effective is to ask “Do you have a request?” when people are discussing critically some actions that occurred in the past. Focusing on suggestions and requests moves a session away from discontent and conflict and toward developing potential solutions.

- ◆ **ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION.** Every group member can encourage the participation of other members simply by asking for their points of view on an issue. Be particularly sensitive to moments when meetings devolve into dialogues between two people with differing opinions. In those circumstances, it can be effective to note that most of the other attendees are not contributing to the conversation, and invite them to do so.



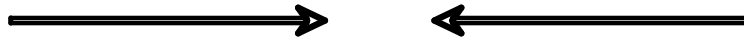
- ◆ **RECOGNIZE THE KIND OF CONVERSATION OCCURRING.** Meeting talk tends to fall generally into one of two kinds of conversation:

Type #1: Divergent Conversations



The above graphic represents conversations that generate more ideas and explore possibilities. These conversations can be characterized as *divergent* because they seek to maximize the different options under consideration. Brainstorming is the best example of an approach consistent with this type of conversation.

Type #2: Convergent Conversations



The diagram above represents conversations that move toward decisions, which necessarily involves eliminating possibilities from consideration until only one remains. These conversations can be characterized as *convergent* because they involve the coming together of opinions into a single agreement. Polling the group is a good example of this approach, as is testing for agreement.

- ◆ **HELP PREPARE PARTICIPANTS FOR THE MEETING WITH “HOMEWORK.”** Frequently, it makes sense to distribute material to members for their review prior to the meeting, especially if one is looking to gather reactions and input. Keep the readings short and relevant, allow enough time for attendees to read them beforehand, and be certain to cover that material in the meeting.