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LCN'10 – RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

This document is a summary of some important points to consider when running meetings.

Robert Rules of Order (Newly Revised)

<http://www.robertsrules.com/> or <http://www.rulesonline.com/>

A couple sample parliamentary procedures are below:

- **How many amendments can be made to a main motion at the same time?** Answer: Two.
- **Does an informal call for the question stop debate and require a vote at that time?** Answer: No, a formal motion to call the question, requiring a second must be made and approved in order to stop the debate, and requires a 2/3 vote)

Have a Reason to Meet

When and where to hold a meeting are important considerations. However, the very first questions a planner should ask are, "Why are we holding this meeting?" and, "What do we want to accomplish?" If there are no clear-cut answers to these questions, think twice about holding the meeting.

The dates or frequency of some meetings, such as standing committees or meetings of the Board, may be set by the bylaws. Where to hold particular meetings is often decided by cost, custom, room availability or amount of space needed. You may be able to meet at an officer's business address or you may need to meet at a hotel.

The time set for the meeting and how long it will run should be given careful consideration. Meetings held at the end of the day seldom hold members unless a meal and/or social hour are included. Optimum times for most business-related meetings are 10:00 am or 2:00 pm Whatever timetable and location you choose, stick to it so that members become familiar with the routine and can plan more easily well in advance.

Know Who Participates

The matter of who attends ASCE meetings is seldom left up to the leader. Participants are most often elected or appointed to positions, or they may simply volunteer. In working committees, it's best to limit the number of members; optimum size is 5-15 members. If there is no limit on committee size and you have more than 15, divide the members into smaller groups and charge each group with specific, defined tasks.

The Agenda

Do not conduct a meeting without a written agenda. Agendas should be typed up and distributed to all participants well in advance to give them time to prepare. The agenda should include the date, place and anticipated schedule of the meeting. The names of all participants should be given, together with the subjects, background information and the status of material to be discussed. Most important, the agenda should clearly set forth the agenda of the meeting (and possibly the time allotted for each topic). A well-constructed agenda will give the meeting purpose and keep it on track.

The meeting leader should not allow the group to wander from the agenda. Schedule the most controversial subjects early in the agenda to allow sufficient time for discussion; however, set time limits for discussion of all items on the agenda.

Be sure to orient new members of the committee prior to the meeting. Provide minutes of the previous





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meeting and other background materials necessary to acquaint the newest members with the issues to be discussed.

Seating Arrangements

A critical factor in determining the outcome of a meeting is the seating arrangement. For small groups, a round or oval table is best. A wide rectangular or U-shaped arrangement works well for larger groups. Larger groups requiring a lot of writing or note taking might consider a schoolroom setup. If a purpose of the meeting is to increase interaction or networking among members, distribute the group among several round tables. Regardless of the setup, the chair or leader of the meeting should be visible by all participants.

Start on Time

Always start the meeting on time. Don't wait for anyone; it sets a bad precedent and discourages others from being on time. Take your watch off at the beginning of the meeting and place it on the table before you. This signals that you intend to stick to the schedule. Briefly state the purpose of the meeting. Emphasize the importance of maintaining a positive atmosphere, especially in meetings where controversial or sensitive issues are to be discussed. Participants should introduce themselves before beginning discussion.

During the Meeting

Be sure the group is focused on the same content. Use a flip chart for listing key points. They are also helpful for defusing heated discussion as it can disassociate the idea from the person proposing it. Before adjourning, review the main points discussed, review conclusions and action items developed, determine who is responsible for each action item, and be sure that all participants are in agreement.

After the Meeting

After the meeting adjourns, the leader still has much to do. The results of the most successful meeting will slip away if they are not put into concrete form immediately. Set up a standard form for recording the results, or minutes, from the meeting. Include the date, time, names of participants, conclusions reached and action items decided. Minutes should never record verbatim discussions or all comments relative to a subject, but rather should simply report decisions made and actions proposed.

Killer Phrases

A key element of successful facilitation is the ability to promote a positive atmosphere, encouraging collaboration and conversation among all the participants. The surest way to inhibit open discussion is "killer" phrases, i.e. phrases which may demean or intimidate participants and stop discussion cold.

Here are a few sample "killer phrases" and more tactful phrasing for each:

Killer phrases

1. *That's not the right answer!* □ Better: "Does anyone else agree?" or "Who else has an answer?" or "Does anyone have a different solution to suggest?"
2. *"Who wants to be the first one to start?"* □ Better: "Who would like to begin the discussion?" or suggest that participants tackle the problem in teams and suggest possible solutions to the group





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3. *"You can't do it that way!"* or *"That doesn't sound right."* □ Better: "Let's analyze that as a group" or "Who else would like to comment?"
4. *"You're not listening to what I say."* □ Better: "What makes you say that?"
5. *"Surely someone has a comment to make."* □ Better: "How does everyone feel about that statement (or situation, comment, etc.?)"
6. *"Do you really believe that?!"* □ Better: "Does anyone else agree or disagree with that statement?"
7. *"Stick to the question."* □ Better: "It seems that we are getting off track." or "We can develop that thought later after we complete discussion on this matter."
8. *"What you are saying does not make sense."* □ Better: "Could you elaborate on that statement?" or "Does everyone understand the question?" or "Could you please repeat that," and then repeat the statement back to the participant to make sure you fully understand the question or proposition, if you are unclear.

Getting the Most From the Group

1. Ask open-ended questions. In general, questions that can be answered with "Yes" or "No" do not generate much new thinking. Try to phrase questions in ways that require explanations, such as, "Why?," "How?," "In what ways.."
2. Encourage group members to supply examples to support their position
3. Don't dismiss an old idea. Instead, call on different people to gain anew perspective on the idea and see if the group can bring it into focus.
4. Use the three most powerful words in the group leader's book of tricks: "Tell me more." All ideas are fragile at birth. These three words allow for expansion and discussion.
5. Remain neutral and don't compete. Even if you favor an idea, don't show it. You are in a powerful position. It's easy to manipulate the group toward one view. Guard against that at all costs.
6. Listen carefully for what is not being said - hidden messages such as body language, tone of voice, etc.
7. Note if someone makes a point and then backs off because they feel it's a point that has already been made. Urge the person to share the point again. You never know?

Dealing with Problems

In nearly every group, someone will not willingly participate as readily as the majority of the group. Keep in mind that some people merely like to hear everyone else before speaking. Very often, these are the people who have thought the problem over and can offer a new and creative insight.

However, sometimes you may encounter a person who wants to dominate the discussion. When this happens:

1. Direct questions away from the individual.
2. Ask the person to "hold that thought."
3. Tell the dominator that you need another point of view.
4. Ask the person to make a note of their point and you will "get back to it."
5. Ask the group to comment on the dominator's primary point. If there is no discussion, then move on.
6. If the steps above do not work, quietly pull the "dominator" aside during the first convenient break and ask them to take a lower profile. Make clear it is not that you don't want their input, you simply feel that others are holding back. Never confront a participant during the meeting; other members may wonder if they are next and the creative spirit will likely shut down.
7. Some conflict can occur in any group environment. In fact it is a necessary and potent ingredient in creativity. To gain the most from conflict:



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- a. Clarify each point. Restate or paraphrase controversial or incendiary statements. This gives people time to cool down.
- b. Look for similarities in points of view. Just one point of agreement may lead to consensus.
- c. Lower the pressure by having other members of the group state the conflicting points. Hearing others repeat what they have said may change the tune (and the tone!) of group members who have taken a hard line.
- d. Have the conflicting parties argue each other's points. This too may help those in conflict see either the strength or the weakness in their positions.

Close Strong

At the end of your session, depending on your objective, single out the most promising ideas. Given the number of ideas a highly productive group may turn out, this may appear to be nearly impossible. If so, here are few tips:

1. Allow the group 5 or 10 minutes to review the ideas.
2. Give each participant \$100 in imaginary money to "spend" on the ideas they feel are the best or most creative solutions to the problem. If a participant thinks that Idea # 37 is just great, he or she may want to spend \$60 on it, leaving \$40 to spend on other ideas.
3. Have group members report the amounts they spent. Record the totals next to each idea and identify the top five.

Follow-Up

You're beat. A hard-driving session can take it out of you, but it's a great feeling. Take down the flip chart sheets and notes you have taped to the walls and put them in order. Get them typed right away before the information gets cold.

Type the top five ideas separately. This is the hard-core information you were after. Keep the other sheets in case some other solutions or directions have emerged from the discussions.

This article was excerpted and adapted from How to Conduct Meetings That Get Results, 1998 and from Floyd Hurt's book, Rousing Creativity: Think New Now! \$ 48. Hurt is founder and president of Probe, Inc., a full-service marketing/advertising agency. Web site: www.rousingcreativity.com

Found at:

<http://www.asce.org/professional/leadership/leadershiptoolsdx.cfm>

