Effective Meetings — Or Are They?

A significant part of the business of volunteer organizations involves **meetings** — yet, in most organizations, little thought is applied to making these meetings effective. End result — little gets accomplished and groups tend to lose good members.

People do not want to sit through meetings that waste time, are poorly organized, or in which conflict exists between members. Can you blame them?

Ask and Evaluate: 10 Questions to Effective Meetings

1. Is Your Purpose Clear?

The clearer your purpose and priorities as a group, the easier it will be to stay on track at meetings. A purpose has several levels:

- overall purpose of the organization;
- purpose of the board;
- purpose of each committee and how it fits into the overall organization.

If everyone involved is clear about *why* they are doing *what* they are doing, there is less chance of meetings and decisions going astray.

2. Do You Use an Agenda?

Is the agenda just a repeat of the last meeting's agenda? Is each topic to be discussed listed in order of importance, and given an appropriate amount of time to be discussed?

Too often agendas are routine. Design your agendas with variety in mind. If someone tells you they were at a meeting where a lot was achieved in a short period of time, you can almost be sure that proper use was made of an agenda.

3. Do You Use Rules of Order?

Rules of order, also known as parliamentary procedures, help to organize discussions, particularly when emotions are high and confusion exists. These same rules are appropriate for all groups and situations. How rigid are your meetings? Does too much technical procedure (motions, amendments, etc) get in the way of decision-making and total group participation? Problems can arise when the chairperson exercises too much control, while at the same time not enough control can lead to frustration and anger.

Nancy Larmer

The first meeting of any group should address how the chairperson proposes to use rules of order, and whether members are comfortable with this or not.

4. Have You Agreed Upon the Norms or Unspoken Rules?

Norms can frequently be a root cause of terrible meetings. Norms are the way the group works together. In some groups norms may include the fact that:

- it is not acceptable to criticize other members;
- it is all right to arrive late;
- it is all right to have side conversations.

Ask members what things are informally "ok to do" and "not ok to do," and whether there are any they want to change.

5. Are Meetings Enjoyable?

If meetings are enjoyable, members will be meeting their needs. Thus, they feel a sense of contribution and reward. Well run meetings make for satisfied volunteers.

Some helpful hints include: providing for a friendly and open environment — talk with your members; ensure everyone has the chance for input; hold social gatherings before, during and after meetings; welcome new members and guests to your meetings.

6. Does Your Chairperson Have the Proper Skills?

Familiarity with parliamentary procedures is just one small aspect of being a good chairperson.

Leadership is a critical variable in any volunteer organization. But often the person running the meeting is not able to run an effective meeting, usually a result of some or all of the following flaws:

- rigid control — the chairperson controls to the point that dialogue is strangled;
- too little control — the chairperson is so lax that decisions do not get made and discussions go on endlessly;
- poor preparation — the chairperson is lost, confused and fails to do homework on issues;
- taking sides — the chairperson shows support for one side of an issue and seeks support for that viewpoint;
- uneven participation — the chairperson is unable to involve all members, and only acknowledges active ones and ignores silent ones;
- poor attention — the chairperson does not listen well and frequently goes off on a tangent.

7. Do Your Members Have the Proper Skills?

Every member has a responsibility to help make the meetings and organization run effectively. Responsibilities include:

- expressing feelings and ideas openly;
- taking ownership of the problems at hand;
- the use of problem solving methods to reach a win-win solution;