

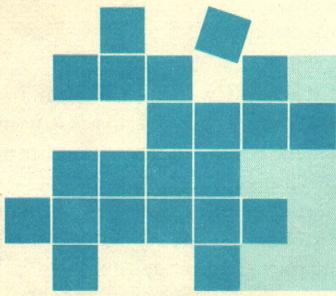
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Look At the Clock! – Ways to Streamline Meetings
Michigan State University Extension Service
Maxine Ferris, Staff Development and Training
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Look At The Clock!

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Ways to Streamline Meetings

Prepared by Maxine Ferris, Specialist in Staff Development and Training

No More Captive Audiences

Time is one of the most valuable inputs of any meeting. The uses of time are many, and the benefits from attending a meeting compared with participating in some other activity frequently favor the other activity. This puts pressure on planners to use meeting time well.

With more and more women becoming multi-role persons — homemaker/worker, homemaker/student, homemaker/volunteer—time demands increase; women may well opt for more limited or no organizational participation. Many organizations now face a leadership or participation crunch. Female role changes also affect male organizational participation since many men now assume a larger share of home and family responsibilities.

Increases in cultural, educational and recreational facilities and opportunities offer strong competition for "free" hours once spent at meetings or participating in organizations.

Organizations can't turn back the clock; they can't count on having "captive" audiences who come to meetings regularly because they crave socialization and have few alternatives. Group leaders must shore up their agendas, streamline their procedures, and vitalize their meeting formats—otherwise, they may soon be presiding over empty meeting rooms.

Time IS of the Essence

A variety of strategies are available to "the person in charge" if he or she is willing to explore and incorporate appropriate measures.

Often we hear the complaint, "The meeting was too long." What is the ob-

jector really saying? "I got tired sitting. The meeting ran too late so I was sleepy. We tried to do too much. It lasted longer than I expected. I needed to be doing other things. It was a very dull meeting. I didn't really have a chance to participate."

Conversely, when we hear, "The meeting was too short," what conclusions should we be drawing? "We tried to do too much. The time went fast because it was a good meeting. I enjoy working with these people. I want more information. The ideas were new and exciting to me."

Planning Produces Pay Offs

In planning meetings, leaders need to consider: What is to be accomplished? What is the fatigue level of the participants? What procedures will best facilitate the meeting?

Ill-conceived, vague notions of what is to be accomplished usually lead to drawn-out meetings. The leader has not set priorities or identified the purpose of the meeting. The meeting rambles; focus is missing. Too often planning for a meeting is done at the last minute, or by someone other than the "doer" or presider. Poor orientation of participants concerning meeting goals also contributes to long, drawn-out meetings.

A well-developed agenda is the first step in the right direction. It can be helpful to "broadcast" the agenda in advance; that way participants can be prepared to discuss certain issues and can pace themselves better during the meeting.

A board of directors may find it useful to provide advance notice of topics to be discussed and actions to be taken. Board members can collect and consider sup-

porting materials in advance. However, larger groups or those less involved in decision making may not want to bother with materials in advance; participants would not pay much attention to an agenda sent out ahead of time.

The wise leader knows the group and uses common sense in the advance distribution of materials. Distributing materials at the door may be more reasonable. In either case, avoid information overload.

Tailor Meetings to Meet Needs

How long should a meeting be? The general saturation point seems to occur between two and two- and one-half hours. There are exceptions: the time of day and room temperature are factors to consider. Just as wise husbands and wives often agree not to make important decisions after a certain evening hour, aware groups may also put a curfew on decision making. Meetings that run into the night frequently produce decisions that stem not from consensus but from exhaustion.

Situations vary, so leaders must determine the options most applicable to their needs. Approaches to better management of time are suggested by the following questions:

1. Do We Begin at the Scheduled Hour?

Begin your meeting on time! Many groups waste up to 45 minutes waiting for members to gather. This is costly. To change this pattern, notify everyone that the next meeting **will** begin promptly. Plan something special as the initial agenda item and stay on schedule. Members who feel they have "missed out" will try to be more punctual next

time. Stabilize the practice by **always** starting on time thereafter. Make it stick!

2. Is Our Starting Time Appropriate?

Evaluate your starting time. If the majority feel it is too early, set it at a more convenient hour. Or consider beginning 30 minutes earlier.

3. Are We Using Breaks to the Best Advantage?

Think about your break times and social hours. Some groups could well dispense with introductory social time; in such cases, coffee, milk, water, and/or soft drinks might be made available throughout the session on a help-yourself basis. Or a 10-15 minute break might be more helpful and refreshing after the group has been deliberating an hour. Realize, however, that informal, social time can be helpful and may be needed by your organization. The "when" and "how much" can best be determined by you. Social time helps members get acquainted, make informal committee exchanges, and neutralize conflicts.

4. Are We Using Written Reports?

Committee reports are often routine. Oral reports are usually longer than necessary and give too much information. Try distributing one-page written reports at the start of the meeting. Committees should, of course, report orally on proposals that require group action.

Distribution of minutes and calling for approval of minutes "as distributed" also saves time. Few people really listen to the reading of minutes—and **seldom** are minutes read well. Yet, many groups continue this activity. (Who really **cares** what the hostess served?) The opportunity to make additions or corrections should not undermine deliberations. Democratic process is not obstructed.

A similar procedure may be followed with the treasurer's report. However, allow for questions and explanations,

and provide ample time once or twice a year for in-depth discussion of budgetary matters. A regular audit is a "must."

5. Are Committees Given Enough Responsibility?

Smaller groups can do certain tasks more efficiently than the membership at large. Research, procedural guidelines, constitutional revisions, and project recommendations might better be hammered out in committee prior to group consideration.

Delegating responsibility can save time, but adequate "controls" must be spelled out for committees. What are the bounds of their authority? What constraints of time, money, and pronouncement are imposed?

Many people prefer working in smaller groups and experience greater rewards from such participation. Thus, the committee or task-force approach to organizational work may induce more involvement.

6. How Can We Control Time?

A written agenda may not be a strong enough reminder to keep moving. Indicating how much time to spend on each item or scheduling parts of the agenda for specific times may control those who talk too much. Include adjournment time in the time "map." Be realistic in preparing an agenda. Your goal should be to follow the time plan, but not be straight-jacketed by it. Use a timer, bell, gong, or other physical reminder. Solution minded groups (i.e. skip over problem analysis or omit criteria for a solution) can gain much from this time-setting approach.

7. More, or Less, Parliamentary Procedure?

There are no hard and fast rules for using parliamentary procedure. No one can deny its worth in managing large groups or those with serious conflicts. However, smaller groups and those dealing with non-controversial subjects tend to use

more of it than is warranted: too many votes are taken, needless verbiage is used and business is slowed because of procedural exchanges.

Allowing discussants to speak without "going through the chair," reduces a lot of redundancy. Too many presidors feel obliged to respond to every comment. It is necessary, however, to know what motions, if any, are required by the bylaws. When this is indicated, the group should abide by the spelled-out procedures or amend the bylaws.

Although parliamentary procedures are not really difficult to master, many feel uncomfortable with them, largely because correct wordings, etc., are easily forgotten. Certain groups thrive on ritual. For them, parliamentary procedure is a "must." Time and efficiency are not germane since conducting the meeting is an end in itself.

8. Should We Meet More Frequently?

Some groups find it easier and more productive to hold two meetings instead of one. Their rationale is that fatigue mars the quality of decision making. With two meetings, one can focus on business matters and the other on in-depth discussion of issues underlying policy decisions. Where meeting double-up is not feasible, groups use every other or every third meeting for study and in-depth discussion, or set aside a half hour of each meeting for a topical discussion which is not necessarily related to any particular motion, but may greatly influence the overall task orientation of the group.

Use Common Sense

Wise leaders manage time as best fits their needs. Common sense dictates that you do not introduce too many procedural changes at the same time; but on occasion sweeping changes introduced can be effective. Know your group, and act accordingly.