Handling Common Meeting Problems

Finishing on time

Meetings often run overtime and consequently many agenda items don't get adequate coverage or don't get covered at all. There are various reasons why meetings run overtime some of which include:

- The meeting did not start on time and thus the group got behind schedule
- The sequence of topics was not based on their significance thus too much time may have been spent initially on items of lesser importance
- Meeting time was not managed well
- Too much was planned for time available

There are several strategies you can use to ensure that your meetings end on time:

- Designate a timekeeper to watch the clock and let participants know when time for an item is almost up, and then when it is *really* up
- Place topics that require more discussion at the very beginning of the agenda
- Start your meeting promptly on time

Can't make decisions

Some meetings seem to drag on as group members struggle to reach consensus and make decisions. The responsibility for coming to decisions rests squarely with the chair or leader. Some common reasons why groups seem unable to make decisions include:

- Goals and outcome are not made explicit for the discussion topic
- Certain participants get side tracked on peripheral issues
- Consequences of not deciding are negligible
- Philosophical issues divide people

There are a number of things you can do as a leader to help a group make decisions more efficiently. These include:

- Clearly convey when a decision is expected for an item on the agenda
- Use prioritizing tools
- When participants seem totally blocked and unable to break through an impasse, go back to the initial question or purpose of the activity and restate it
- Ask which alternatives are supported by data

Adapted from:
https://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/AcademicLeadershipSupport/LeadMeetings/tabid/74/Default.aspx

Dominant Participants

Dominant participants often stifle collaborative problem solving and creativity among participants. But they often have good ideas that deserve consideration. Good leaders need to direct the energies of dominant participants in a non-threatening way so that others have opportunities to contribute.

Effective leaders use some of the following techniques and strategies in handling dominant participants:

- Invite other participants to respond or go round-robin
- Call on participants by name to ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak
- State that you want everyone in the group to share their perspective
- Thank the dominant person and say that we want to hear from everyone

---

Silent Participants

People are quiet in meetings for different reasons. Some people are reticent by nature. Others are fearful that their opinions will be ridiculed and dismissed. Some are not comfortable speaking if they don't know for sure who everyone is. It's your role as a group leader to try to engage everyone.

Some strategies the group leader or chair can take to engage everyone include:

- If meeting participants don’t know each other, ask people to create name tents for themselves (writing on front and back).
- Ask a question early in the meeting that most people can respond to and the go round robin asking for responses.
- Give people five minutes to write down their ideas or thoughts in a silent brainstorm before opening the general discussion.
- Break into small groups or pairs to discuss aspects of an issue before opening the general discussion. Be sure the questions or issue to be discussed is clear. Ask the groups what they came up with.
- For perennially quiet participants, the chair may discuss with the individual in private the importance of everyone's ideas, saying something like, "I noticed you haven't said much about the move, but I'd like to hear what you think about it." Then encourage the person to share those thoughts within the meeting.
- By visually recording all the ideas in a brainstorming session, the chair or facilitator emphasizes the importance of everyone's contributions and helps stimulate participation. Holding critiquing of the brainstormed ideas until all have been listed can also be a powerful motivator for reticent participants.

Adapted from:
https://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/AcademicLeadershipSupport/LeadMeetings/tabid/74/Default.aspx

Rehashing Decisions

Issues that were discussed and decided on in previous meetings sometimes re-emerge to be rehashed. This can be very discouraging to the group or committee. Some reasons for this include:

- People were not aware that a conclusive decision was actually made regarding a specific issue
- People recall that a decision was made, but the record of it is not available
- Dominant participants pushed through a decision in a previous meeting and silent participants begin to speak up afterwards

A group leader can do several things to prevent and or derail the rehashing of previous decisions.

- For groups that meet regularly, someone is responsible for keeping meeting notes, agendas and supporting documents in one place where they can be referenced later. Ideally these past decisions are available during the meeting as a reference.
- Electronic storage of minutes on web sites or shared drives makes it possible to search for key words or phrases.
- Use decision-making and prioritizing techniques that involve everyone, including less verbal members.

Deal with small fires but not larger issues

Meetings are often used to deal with immediate problems. When meetings focus only on immediate, urgent issues, larger and more global issues may be ignored and opportunities for prevention may be missed. As leader you can ensure that you discuss something that is important, but not necessarily urgent, at every meeting.

To ensure that larger issues are not ignored, consider some of these strategies for structuring your meetings:

- Decide which staff meetings will be devoted to which larger issues or topics. The larger issue is on the agenda first followed by other business.
- When composing the meeting agenda make sure you include at least one item for discussion that focuses on something strategically important, but not urgent.
- Invite leaders with responsibility for aspects of the larger issues to attend selected meetings to provide a broader context for understanding and discussion.

Key persons don't attend

When key staff don't attend meetings, decisions may be made that are later questioned and/or not implemented as hoped. Without some regular interaction, office and department members become isolated, making collaboration and cooperation more difficult. As a leader, you can help ensure that key players attend meetings and provide input when needed.

Some strategies you can employ to encourage key persons to attend meetings include these:

- Diagnose the problem by understanding why people aren't attending. Ask a few of the non-attenders in an exploratory way, rather than threatening way, why they don't come.
- Make your meetings worth attending so that real work gets done. If meetings are used primarily for announcements and information sharing, there may be better ways to share the information (e.g. email, web, bulletin board).
- If the culture of the department or office has been that meetings are optional, it will require a statement from you, the leader, that you expect that meetings will be real work sessions and will be most productive if everyone attends.

Lack of follow-through on tasks

The effectiveness of a meeting can be measured in terms of its outcomes. If people don't follow-through on action plans, tasks and decisions after the meeting ends, then one needs to question the value of having a meeting in the first place. The leader is the single most important factor in follow-through. It's your job to be clear at the end of every meeting who is responsible for what and by when.

A leader can use these tools and techniques to achieve more effective follow-through after a meeting:

- Use written action plans. People usually need to be able to see in writing what action is required of them and by when.
- Assign a point person who is responsible for ensuring that a goal moves forward.
- Check meetings or phone status-check meetings should be set up when the action is first being planned. There is nothing like a deadline to stimulate action.

Adapted from:
https://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/AcademicLeadershipSupport/LeadMeetings/tabid/74/Default.aspx