Gregorio Billikopf, University of California (gebillikopf@ucdavis.edu, 209.525-6800)
COMPLETE BOOK: http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7labor/

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Conducting Effective Meetings

"I can still remember arriving early to staff meetings at one ranch I worked for. I wanted to make sure to sit where I could look out the window and 'escape' from the meeting. I can also recall a job where the meetings were effectively planned and carried out. Unfortunately, most of the meetings I have attended have fallen into the unbearably unproductive category."

Cattle Ranch Employee
Napa, California

A group of friends carries on a conversation for a couple of hours. No one remembers how they ended up talking about the lives of penguins in the Antarctic when they had started out discussing home computers. Unless the friends were trying to accomplish something more than interesting conversation, they did no harm. When business meetings resemble this gathering of friends, however, few decisions are made and much time is wasted. It takes skill and follow-through to conduct effective meetings.

Meetings can be useful. Workers can learn directly rather than through the grapevine about new personnel policies or participate in decision making. Subordinates can keep supervisors and coworkers informed of new developments or conditions encountered on the job. Often workers come in contact with potential problems first, and early detection can save time and expense. Meetings, then, are held to inform people about policies or operations, gather information, conduct training, resolve problems, or make decisions.

What makes for an effective meeting? Having a purpose, preparing ahead of time, setting goals during the meeting, and making provisions for follow-through and assessment afterwards are critical. A successful meeting is like a team that carefully cuts, trims and prepares a portion of meat to be hung by a hook. A hook is added, the meat is lifted and placed on a rail, and sent on its way. Oftentimes, however, much work takes place in meetings but challenges are not really solved. The participants may have cut, cleaned and even lifted the heavy carcass, but they have failed to put it on the rail. Next time, they will have to clean and lift it again. That is, much time and effort is spent in meetings but this time is often wasted because specific assignments were not made and follow through is seldom carried out. Despite the potential solutions that may arise during the meeting, it is likely that the same problem will continue to come up over and over in the future. An important question to ask after a meeting may be, "What are we going to do differently because we met?"

If people know that a subject that is important to them will be raised, they are less likely to interrupt and derail the meeting. This is an important contribution of the agenda.

Planning

All too often meetings take place without an express purpose, are too long, and little is accomplished. A clear understanding of objectives to be accomplished is essential to an effective meeting. Once the purpose is apparent, questions as to who will attend, and where (and when) the meeting will take place can be dealt with.

Agendas may include time for (1) review of notes from past business; (2) discussion of new issues; and (3) evaluation of progress toward goal achievement. Supervisors are cautioned not to be overly optimistic about what can be accomplished in a single meeting.

Several short meetings may work best for some objectives. Participants are more likely to absorb training material, for instance, when they can apply it between one meeting and the next. This flexibility may not exist when a decision has to be made before adjourning. Also, a single yet longer meeting may be preferable when participants have to travel distances to attend or need to make arrangements to have their normal duties covered during their absence.

Most employees do not mind attending a meeting if it is productive. Meeting length can be shortened by assigning reading or information gathering activities ahead of time.[1] Holding meetings close to quitting time or outside on a cold or windy day are

more conducive to brevity but discourage worker participation. Other factors influencing group interaction include seating, refreshments, temperature, lighting, and ventilation (increasingly, employees expect a nonsmoking policy). Regardless of apparent formality, to be effective, meetings need to be well planned.

Conducting the meeting

The role of the individual conducting the meeting is to (1) keep the discussion on target (*task* function) while at the same time (2) making sure everyone gets heard and people's needs are met (*maintenance* function). Most often, the supervisor takes on the task of conducting a meeting, but this role may be delegated. A meeting with an ineffective leader will often resemble our friends talking about penguins.

Starting on time is a good practice; so is ending on time. Punctuality, or lack of it, can become a tradition.

Meeting agenda. If the agenda has not been given out in advance, it can be distributed at the beginning of the meeting. Employees may be encouraged to contribute topics for discussion before the meeting starts. The individual conducting the meeting can also ask for agenda additions before any agenda items are discussed. Agendas are critical, yet many managers operate without their benefit, or have an agenda but do not follow it. If people know that a subject that is important to them will be raised, they are less likely to interrupt and make attempts to introduce it at inopportune times. Meeting participants also tend to bring up interesting yet often irrelevant information. While contributors need a certain measure of self-discipline in this respect, having an accurate agenda does much towards a smooth and efficiently running meeting. Agreements on how the meeting time will be spent can also be established at the beginning.

Discussion guidelines can help keep meetings orderly. Examples of rules you may want to use include:

- Only one person speaks at a time. Often people naturally take turns without having to be formally acknowledged. While this is ideal, in those situations where the meeting gets out of order, a more formal acknowledgment procedure may be necessary. For instance, those who want to contribute may be asked to raise their hand.
- Attempt to understand the needs behind positions (Chapter 18).
- Try to understand both the positive and negative aspects of suggestions. Getting to the best solution is more important than who made the suggestion.
- Comments will be asked for, at times, beginning with the least and ending with the most senior person (explain that new people often can see issues with more clarity, and also explain that when a more senior person makes a comment, that this comment may sometimes sound so final others do not feel they can contradict it).
- If someone shows a lot of emotion in a comment, it is because the individual has an important unmet need or fear relating to an issue. This should be looked upon as an opportunity to better understand each other. (It is very effective to have individuals attempt to name their opponents unmet needs as we discuss in Chapter 18.)

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Participants should not feel they have to yield their opinions to promote consensus. In effective decision making, a good team player is not the person who yields in the face of opposition, but rather, the person who is willing to make the important, yet sometimes unpopular, points.

- Remind participants that this is the time to speak up if they have something to say. It will do little good for them to express their dissatisfaction with what was said or agreed upon after the meeting is over.
- Private conversations are not to be conducted during the meeting.
- People need to speak on the subject being discussed.
- Comments and discussions need to address *issues*, not *personalities*.

The group leader's role—when promoting participation—is that of a facilitator. Rather than take sides or show favoritism, she can help participants clarify their views without judging the merit of their ideas. A supervisor who wants to be very involved in a discussion may ask someone else to conduct the meeting.

Other than keeping the meeting on target, facilitating decision making is one of the group leader's major responsibilities. Meeting participants need to know how much decision-making power is being delegated to them (Chapter 13). To develop understanding of a problem and move toward a solution:

- Pick one challenge at a time.
- Rather than begin with solutions, first focus on a detailed analysis of where things can or do go wrong. All too often people place too much emphasis on solutions rather than clearly understanding the problem.
- The emphasis of all discussion should be on understanding the problem, not on assigning blame.
- Once the challenge seems clear, brainstorm potential proposals and solutions (these should not be evaluated at this point).
- Encourage participants to be tentative in their comments, so creativity is not stifled.
- Discuss pros and cons of the different approaches.
- Ask for new approaches that may include the best contributions of the various suggestions.
- Seek consensus. Avoid premature use of voting to arrive at decisions. Nevertheless, voting can be used to focus on the top possible solutions.
- During the process, barometric voting can take place. This is not a vote to make a decision, but to measure public opinion and see how people are feeling after new light has been shed on the challenges being discussed.
- Participants should not feel they have to yield their opinions to promote consensus. In effective decision making, a good team player is not the person who yields in the face of opposition, but rather, the person who is willing to make the important, yet sometimes unpopular, points.
- Sometimes the greatest danger of a premature resolution exists when a solution seems imminent.
- Rather than coming to quick solutions, ask participants to help think of situations where the tentative solution may *not* work out. Make the necessary adjustments to account for potential difficulties.
- Resolve issues whenever possible before moving on. If an impasse is reached:
  a) Help others find out where they agree and disagree (see Chapter 18).
  b) Assign further study, if appropriate.
  c) If disagreements persist and accommodations or compromises cannot be made, announce how and when decisions will be made.
- Ask participants: "How will we know, say a year from now, if this problem has been solved?"
- Document decisions reached and who was present. If there were disagreements, document minority opinions, if this is desired.

Listening skills are essential for a supervisor conducting a meeting. Often, much of what is said in a meeting is not heard because participants are more eager to express their own points than to listen. Participants may be encouraged to jot down ideas while the other person is talking, rather than interrupting.

A participant can be assigned to "spot" ideas or suggestions. It can be an effective practice to record ideas coming out of a meeting. Clearly, the supervisor does not have to agree with all the ideas, but if they are documented, he can follow through and decide whether the ideas will be implemented now, delayed, or tabled indefinitely. Workers are more likely to participate if they feel their ideas are given serious consideration.

Individuals in a power position are more likely to be successful in introducing a topic. An idea may be well-received when brought up by a highly respected group member, although it was ignored a few minutes earlier when brought up by someone in a less dominant position. In one study, for instance, women only succeeded in 36 percent of their attempts to establish a topic of conversation while men did so 96 percent of the time.[2] It often helps to write ideas where all can see them, without the name of the contributor, in order to help separate ideas from who suggested them.

Often, meetings degenerate into a point and counterpoint argument between participants where nothing gets resolved. This difficulty is due, in part, to people feeling their ideas are not properly understood or acknowledged.

Acknowledging alternatives and minority opinions is a way of encouraging creative thinking. Group participants can quickly discern when their own alternatives are not wanted and often learn to keep their feelings to themselves. The extreme of this behavior can lead to "group-think," where supervisors or more influential workers have their ideas rubber-stamped in the absence of discussion or consideration of creative alternatives.

In the farm workers' culture, it is common that when a worker gives a public opinion, no one will contradict it. That is why it is important to promote, from the beginning, a culture where workers will have the confidence to give opinions that challenge those of their co-workers and those of their supervisors as well. Once a decision is made, of course, all should work to help make its realization a success.

Additional challenges you may encounter when conducting meetings, include:

- meeting extenders (those who want to prolong meetings to avoid work);
- showoffs, as well as participants who have their favorite subject or personal agenda;
- signs showing participants have lost interest, do not understand what is being said, or may disagree, though they do not express it;
- shooting down someone's idea, since this can extinguish creativity;
- stating that one has the solution, which can also shut down creativity.

All too often people take ownership of a suggestion and allow their self-esteem to be affected by the results. They take acceptance or rejection of their solution personally. Instead, team

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members need to take joy in coming up with a solution that works.

You know you are on the way to success when individual team members are able to see both the pros and the cons of a proposed solution. That is, when a participant can point out the *good* in a solution that is *not* his preferred and the *shortcomings* of one that *is*. This, in fact, shows individuals are growing and beginning to think like effective managers.

Setting goals and following through

Solving problems, setting goals, and making concrete plans to follow through are the purposes of decision-making and problem-solving meetings. A decision is worthless if no plans are made to assure its implementation. Responsibility for follow-through can be delegated to accountable individuals.

Throughout the meeting, participants need to be vigilant in recognizing *action* items—those matters that call for specific steps toward a solution. These action items generally are the most important reasons for the meetings. Otherwise, it is just too easy to always hope for better days, complain about challenges, but do nothing to solve difficulties. In such cases, it would have been better not to have had a meeting.

Any business that is not fully dealt with will tend to reappear again and again until a concrete decision is made. The key, then, is to manage meetings so specific issues are discussed and solved. These should be quality solutions that have a positive effect on the future.

Finally, asking participants what worked well and what could be improved next time—in terms of how the meeting was conducted—can help meetings become more productive and useful.

Summary

Meetings can be a positive communication tool. Planning will help a meeting accomplish more in less time. Everyone will not always agree on the best way difficulties should be solved, but friendly disagreements about solutions can be beneficial. A meeting will be a waste of time, however, unless concrete action plans are made to solve problems. Specific dates for goal accomplishments can be set and followed up later.

Chapter 16 References

1. Cranes, W. T. (1980). *Effective Meetings for Busy People: Let's Decide It and Go Home* (p. 26). New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.
2. Elgin, S. (1983). *More on the Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc.

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