
Playing your meetings by the rules

Taking a New Direction in Staff Meetings

by Lynne Meservey and Barbara Grundleger

In 1990, we became responsible for a multi-unit child care company which had fallen on difficult times and had been sold. One of the critical challenges we faced was developing a management team that could implement changes that were necessary to save the company. One of the most significant factors in achieving these goals and objectives was the implementation of a method we developed for conducting meetings. This method helped turn our company around by improving communication and group dynamics.

At some time, you probably have attended a meeting you felt was a waste of time — the kind of meeting that is dominated by outspoken individuals who rarely give others a chance to speak. At these types of meetings you may have found that decisions were made without the input of the whole group, in spite of the fact that some group members would have to implement those decisions irregardless of whether or not they supported them.

In 1991, we implemented a meeting procedure based on one developed by Dr. Ichak Adizes* in his work with companies experiencing a condition he calls *mis-management*. This method has provided us with a new way to communicate, to learn,

and to work together. We have been able to cut to the bottom line of most problems and solve them quickly and effectively. Our company has stabilized and we see a bright future ahead.

The secret is structure. Dr. Adizes found that when people have clear rules to the gamesmanship of meeting they are attentive and involved. Using his findings as a basis for our program, we formulated our own *rules* for meetings.

Time and Place

Start and end on time. Set odd times for meetings, i.e., 10:10 AM. People are more likely to be on time if the starting time is not set on the

hour or half hour. Expect participants to be on time out of mutual respect for others. When tardiness occurs, assess a penalty. The penalty can be an agreed upon amount of money for every minute of tardiness up to ten minutes. When a team member is late, she can quietly place the fine in a special container and join the group. No excuses are made. Everyone is expected to arrive on time and early departures are not acceptable. At the end of the year, the team can decide how to spend the fine monies.

Same time, same place. It's best if all meetings are held at a regularly scheduled time and place so there is no confusion about where to be and when.

The Meeting Environment

Room arrangement. The room should not be too large or too small for the group. A close, circular arrangement of chairs is best so that each person can see all of the other participants. For long meetings, arrange tables in a square, again so that everyone can see and also have a place to write.

No interruptions. While it is not easy in child care to avoid interrup-

*Dr. Ichak Adizes is the founder and director of the Adizes Institute and creator of the methodology that bears his name. He is the author of **Corporate Lifecycles: How Organizations Grow and Die and What To Do About It** (1988) and **How to Solve the Mismanagement Crisis** (1979). The Adizes Institute is located in Santa Monica, California.

tions or distractions, choose a meeting place that minimizes these problems. Take messages and interrupt the meeting only for an emergency.

No smoking, eating, gum chewing, or drinking. These activities distract the speakers and other meeting participants.

Role Responsibilities

At each meeting, individuals assume roles to help run a smooth, productive meeting.

Facilitator. This individual creates a learning environment for the group by leading the meeting. She helps to integrate the team's ideas and keeps the group on track. No deviations from the agenda are permitted without group consensus.

Timekeeper. Time is scheduled for each agenda item. The timekeeper monitors the agenda and gives the speaker a one minute warning before time is up by softly ringing a bell. Changes in the schedule must be agreed upon by all members of the group. The timekeeper also monitors break times and gives the one minute warning to break and to regroup.

Observer. The observer's job is to watch the dynamics of the meeting and to report at the end of the meeting about her observations. The objective of the observer's report is to mirror how the group feels in a non-evaluative way. She relates what helped and what hindered the meeting.

Recapper. This individual's job is to recap the decisions made during the meeting and to remind participants of due dates and deadlines for items discussed. Our team members particularly like this report because it makes certain that they haven't

forgotten something on their to-do list.

The Process

Focus. Before the meeting begins, each participant greets the group in turn and indicates how they are feeling. This makes each participant *join* the group and focuses complete attention on the meeting.

Goals. Participants indicate what they hope will be accomplished at the meeting. These items are written on a flip chart or board.

Discussion. As each agenda topic is introduced, participants are encouraged to talk. Usually each person may talk about the topic as long as she wishes with no interruption or the timekeeper will stipulate how long the discussion can be. (A penalty can be assessed for speaking out of turn, if you wish.)

When she finishes talking, she turns her head to the right which signals others who wish to talk that they may raise their hands. She calls on the next person to her right who has raised her hand. She does this by stating the person's first name only.

The process of using the person's name insures that the initial speaker has said all that she needs to say and she is ready to move on. This is a key component of the discussion rules. As the participants wait their turn, they develop patience and tolerance of others. More importantly, they learn how others are affected by situations or actions under consideration.

We encourage the participants not to repeat what someone before them has said, but to feel free to add to their comments. Often, the speaker will acknowledge a previous speaker's thoughts by saying, "I agree with . . .," which enables us to

validate and support what others think. This means that we must listen carefully to what each speaker is saying instead of thinking about our own response. Repetitive remarks are avoided so that business can be conducted efficiently and effectively.

There are times that we feel that everyone's input is vital to the topic on the table. When these times occur, we ask everyone in the circle to speak. We've found that these required statements encourage the less vocal members of our team to speak up. This knowledge helps us make better decisions because we give equal consideration to all viewpoints. We work hard to resolve any differences that arise so that we are not asking a team member to implement something she doesn't support.

Review of goals. As the end of the meeting approaches, we review our goals for the meeting and decide whether we have achieved them. Unmet goals are scheduled for discussion at another time or can be dropped by the persons who originated them.

Observer's report. The observer's report is the last item on the agenda and it focuses on the meeting dynamics. This feedback enables the group to continually strive for improvement.

Before the implementation of this system, we each brought our personal agendas to the meetings. Because we had not worked together before, we had little knowledge of the feelings or opinions of the other team members. There was little communication and a lot of frustration. Following the implementation of this method, there was a remarkable change in the group dynamics. In the beginning, it was hard to stick to the structured meeting style. It was particularly difficult for mem-

bers of our group who are assertive and accustomed to speaking without hesitation. But we have learned to adjust. This process has promoted a congenial and collaborative environment where we can work toward common goals. Thanks to this new direction in meetings, we're looking ahead to a prosperous future.

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