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“MEETINGS SHOULD BE EFFECTIVE, PURPOSEFUL”

When well planned and well facilitated, meetings can effectively boost morale, productivity and relationships, while minimizing misunderstandings. The intention is to bring people together to share information, clarify common goals and objectives, plan, strategize, and create priorities and action plans. A by-product of well-run meetings is cohesiveness. Teams can be strengthened by a common sense of purpose and the opportunity to respectfully work through challenges and issues together.

Regularly scheduled meetings such as staff meetings can be beneficial because people can operate knowing that there is time carved out of their week for team members to access one another. Not all meetings are beneficial, however, particularly if a group meets just because the time is scheduled, and not for any focused purpose. Here are some guidelines and tips to keep meetings focused and productive:

BEFORE THE MEETING:

- Create an agenda that is accessible beforehand for everyone to read and/or contribute to.
- Determine if some meetings can be by-passed or if the group can communicate by an alternate mode such as phone meeting, email, or a web-based meeting system.
- Invite only the people that really need to be there. While there can be benefit of everyone hearing the content, there may be times when receiving meeting notes after the fact will be sufficient.
- Send reminders to participants prior, including the expectation that the meeting will start and end on time.

DURING THE MEETING:

- Set the stage by agreeing to respectful listening and dialogue as a standard of operation. This is important to reiterate and maintain especially during stressful times, or if the topics are controversial with the potential to create conflict.
- Negotiate and prioritize the agenda for the amount of time available. If the agenda is short, plan to dismiss early.
- As they emerge, identify when topics or discussions need to go "off-line" with the people affected by them.
- The person running the meeting should facilitate, not dominate. Make sure everyone has the opportunity for input. Draw out or encourage those who tend to hold back or not fully participate - there can be great some ideas waiting to be heard.
- If it suits the group, consider having a rotating facilitator, so that different people get to practice and build their facilitation skills. It also creates the opportunity to experience differing styles.
- If the facilitator has difficulty balancing appropriate time for discussion and keeping the agenda moving, designate a time keeper to keep the group focused and on pace.
- Have someone capture the highlights of the meeting, particularly what was decided or resolved. This helps in planning and follow-up, and is helpful to keep those who were unable to attend to stay "in the loop".
- At the conclusion of the meeting, recap what was discussed or decided, and review who is doing what by when. This helps to clarify expectations and promote accountability.

AFTER THE MEETING:

- Distribute meeting notes by email to everyone within one or two business days, with a confirmation of the next meeting date and time.

(Adapted from author's column previously published in the Syracuse newspaper)