Citizens Changing Communities

Fact Sheet #98-52

TIME AND MEETING MANAGEMENT SKILLS
Community Board Development – No. 1

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"We must seek, above all, a world of peace; a world in which peoples dwell together in mutual respect and work together in mutual regard"

John F. Kennedy

Working together in mutual regard with one person is difficult enough, let alone working together with a group or an entire board. How do boards manage their time and meetings to allow for agenda items to be discussed and effective decisions made? Regardless of what we do, time passes by at a predetermined rate (actually its 8,760 hours per year). Although we cannot control time, we can learn to manage ourselves within time. The key to time and meeting management includes good organizational and planning skills.

Designing Your Road Map – The Agenda

The first step toward managing time and meetings begins with a good agenda. The agenda serves as the meeting road-map and is critical to the success of the meeting in three ways.

1) It clarifies the objectives so people understand the meeting purpose and tasks;
2) distributing the agenda prior to the meeting helps participants plan and prepare to make an effective contribution; and
3) during the meeting, the agenda provides direction and focus for the discussion.

Another concern regarding agenda development is to prevent an overcrowded agenda. Crammed

agendas usually undermine a group's ability to focus because members feel overwhelmed with the magnitude of the agenda. Other considerations include the placement of items. Place the most compelling or most time consuming items near the top of the agenda. People will be fresher and better able to give their full attention and it also encourages people to arrive on time.

Creating a Shared Focus

The agenda should be reviewed before the meeting and before each topic is presented. This also includes reviewing the desired outcome. Reviewing the agenda at the beginning of the meeting allows members to get focused, develops shared expectations for the meeting, and it reaffirms the boards road-map for the next two hours. All meetings should have a predetermined timeframe; (e.g. 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.). Meetings should generally last about 2 hours unless there are unique circumstances and breaks are included. Meetings that run considerably longer than the 2-hour timeframe accomplish nothing but frustration and fatigue of board members.

Nevada Open Meeting Law (NRS Chapter 241)

Although the Nevada Open Meeting Law (NRS Chapter 241) requires some community boards to develop and post an agenda, the law does not provide guidance on how to structure or properly use the agenda for effective meetings. According to the Open Meeting Law, the agenda must contain the time, place, and location of the meeting, a list of locations where it has been posted, a period devoted to public comments, statement of the topics to be considered during the meeting, and a description of the items to be voted on during the meeting. The purpose in structuring an agenda is not only to meet the requirements of the Open Meeting Law, but also to serve as a powerful tool that manages your time and meeting effectiveness.

Meeting Outcomes

Good agenda planning requires two critical components: 1) clarify the desired outcome for each topic and 2) design a process to reach each outcome. The outcome is what members will expect from the topic, and process is how the group will manage itself to reach the desired outcome. When discussion of a new topic begins, board members need to know what they are expected to achieve for that topic. Additionally, many topics can be handled more effectively if a process is designed to assist the group in reaching their intended outcome regardless if the group is reaching consensus, taking a vote, or simply gathering opinions and concerns.

Meeting Process

When a topic is introduced at a meeting, most groups automatically go into open discussion and continue the discussion until it's time to move on to the next topic. Conducting a meeting in this fashion typically leads to lengthy meetings, frustrated members, unclear outcomes, and group divisiveness. However, by dividing the thinking time into various participation formats (or designing a process) helps to maintain the group's

attention and concentration, and typically leads to more productive meetings. For example, if the topic is *Review ABC development plan* and the desired outcome is *provide board comments to commissioner/council members*, it may be more effective to subdivide this topic. First brainstorm a list among the members of positive and negative aspects of the topic; record all comments on an easel pad so the board can view them; then review the items recorded and categorize or group similar items.

Categorizing/Sorting Board Ideas

Categorizing items and sorting items into categories are two different tasks. Creating categories can be difficult for groups because people don't share common meanings for words. Although categorizing can become time consuming it is important when a board wants to gain a deeper understanding of each other's values and goals. Sorting items however can be a fairly easy task. By using pre-defined, simple categories such as cost, desirability, potential problems, time needed, and next steps, a board can reduce a large list of items into manageable ideas.

Remember that when brainstorming or categorizing you are not seeking to convince members your idea is right, nor are you there to argue another member's idea is wrong. The purpose is to quickly gather the breadth of board opinions regarding the topic and making sure all board members are heard. After ideas have been categorized or grouped, the final phase should allow for open discussion. During open discussion, members can examine each cluster or grouping of ideas and add any other points they feel may be missing. Once all of the ideas have been sorted, the board has quickly and concisely formulated their collective comments thus reaching their desired outcome: *to provide board comments to commissioners or council members*.

Additional Meeting Techniques

There are two other key items critical to time and meeting management: 1) use an ideas bin and 2) establish and use ground rules.

Ideas Bin

✓ A "bin" consists of blank sheets (one or two) torn from an easel pad and taped to the wall. Any idea that is unrelated to the current topic is written on the easel pad paper (i.e. placed in the bin). The bin serves two valuable purposes: 1) it stores ideas for consideration at an appropriate and convenient time and 2) it allows discussion to stay focused on the agenda topic. Using the bin is an effective way to keep discussion focused and it helps people to convey their thoughts and ideas without being disruptive to the meeting. During the meeting the board leader should record bin items as they come up. If you want to encourage individual involvement for meeting effectiveness, all members should share responsibility for moving unrelated items to the bin when they feel the discussion is getting off track.

Ground Rules

✓ Ground rules are explicit rules that the group agrees to follow to help them facilitate productive discussions. Whether the board leader presents the ground rules or the board formulates them collectively, all members should reach consensus on following the ground rules. The ground rules should be written down on an easel pad or recorded somewhere for everyone to see at each meeting. Ground rules lay out the expectations of "the way things should be done at meetings." Ground rules are used to facilitate group interaction, not to restrict it. The group can change the ground rules or add new ones based on group needs.

Ground Rule Examples

◆ Arrive and start on time
◆ Stick to the agenda
◆ Focus discussion on agenda topics
◆ Listen to understand
◆ Respect different viewpoints
◆ End on time

Facilitative Leadership

In order for boards to manage group process (e.g., manage themselves to be effective boards) they should also foster facilitative leadership.

Facilitative leaders help to increase overall group effectiveness. A facilitative leader is one (or it could be many board members) who exercise and practice the values of collaboration and empowerment. A facilitative leader encourages members of the group to share in equal participation by making sure all members have a chance to express their thoughts and opinions on an issue.

Board Collaboration

Not only do facilitative leaders share their reasons for their statements or actions (explaining why) but they also share their feelings about a topic so others do not have to make assumptions. Untrue assumptions are typically the cause of group conflict. Collaboration ensures everyone on the board has a chance to express him or herself. A facilitative leader asks the board for their opinions or ideas regardless of whether members agree or disagree. If a member has a different view, the leader does not get defensive but rather explores the possibility of this added perspective. Approaching different opinions in this manner allows the "undiscussable" issues to be expressed – this also reduces potential conflict. Conflict management skills will be detailed in Community Board Development – No. 2.

Board Empowerment

When members recognize their input is important and different viewpoints are encouraged, they develop ownership in the board's decisions and actions. Facilitative leaders also strive for board empowerment, which means distributing power among the board. Empowerment occurs when members begin demonstrating the values of collaboration and sharing responsibility for the success of the meeting. This also includes sticking to the agenda, using a bin, and following the ground rules. Distributing power among board members typically leads to better decisions and trust among the group since members recognize the value of their input and develop a shared commitment to the boards' success.

Summary

Time and meeting management skills include:

◆ planning and using the agenda;
◆ using a bin;
◆ establishing ground rules;
◆ exercising facilitative leadership

It is easy to get caught up in the pressure of the meeting and lose sight of perspectives. Working together in mutual regard takes time and practice. Explore your style for managing meetings while slowly incorporating new skills and techniques. Keep in mind that stress diminishes creativity and spontaneity and generally lowers the quality of results or input achieved by groups. The best board participation comes from people who are able to laugh together, discuss issues, and take pride in their efforts. So relax and explore your style with these ideas.

References

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Kaner, Sam, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger. 1996. *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making.* New Society Publishers. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada. 255 pp.

Schwarz, Roger. 1994. *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups.* Jossey-Bass Publisher, San Francisco. 314 pp.

This is a handout in a series of **Community Board Development** training materials.

- "Time and Meeting Management Skills"
  Community Board Development – No. 1
- "Conflict Management Skills"
  Community Board Development – No. 2
- "Problem Solving Techniques"
  Community Board Development – No. 3
- "Goal Setting and Action Planning Skills"
  Community Board Development – No. 4
- "Decision Making Skills and Techniques"
  Community Board Development – No. 5