**Planning Agendas and Managing Board Meetings**

**Sample Agenda #1 (Not the Ideal)**

1. Superintendent's report

2.  Report from Curriculum Committee

3. Results of standardized tests

4. New Business

5. Old Business

# Building a Meeting Process
## Not a Meeting Event

Most of us see meetings as events with almost all the effort concentrated on the meeting itself. We know there's a bit of preparation and some follow-up, but the main work for us occurs at the meeting itself.

However, if we want to improve our meeting productivity, particularly for more difficult or more significant meetings, we need to view meetings as a step in a process.

## Use an Agenda

The first step in improving meetings is to improve meeting agendas. Each meeting should have an agenda, preferably one developed prior to the meeting. It should be sent to participants in advance, if possible. If an agenda has not been developed before a meeting, spend the first five minutes of the meeting writing one on a flipchart.

Agendas should include the following information:

- Purpose of the meeting.
- Topics (framed in the form of a question that defines each item and why it is being discussed.)
- The lead person for each topic (usually the person who will introduce the topic).
- Time estimates.

Agendas for complex meetings might also include:

- Methods for segments of the meeting. (e.g., "First we will have a general discussion; then we will circle the group for ideas about next steps; then....")
- Desired outcomes for each topic. (Will this topic end with a decision, a plan, a list of options, shared understanding, etc.?)
- For organizing complex agendas use the "Meeting Liturgy."

Agendas usually include the following meeting activities:

- Warm-up. Short (five-minute) activities used to free people's minds from the outside world and get them focused on the meeting.
- Agenda Review. Go over the agenda, adding or deleting items. Modify time estimates if necessary.

# Kinds of Meetings

## 1. Information Dump

This meeting is simply to convey information and to clarify questions people have about the information. Be clear about the purpose of this meeting or the group will start problem-solving. Be sure to entertain only questions that deal with clarifying the information.

## 2. Problem Solving

The purpose of this kind of meeting is to get all the information out so you can clarify the priority issue before making a decision. This meeting should go through the problem solving process:

a) Identify the problem to be solved
b) Gather data about the problem
c) Analyze the data
d) Generate possible solutions
e) Evaluate solutions
f) Decide on solution

## 3. Decision making

The purpose of this meeting is to make a decision on a clearly defined issue. Often a problem solving meeting becomes a decision making meeting.

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of this meeting is to "knock around ideas." This is an idea-generating meeting.

# The Meeting "Liturgy"

1.  What is the issue?  (put in form of a clear question)

2.  How much time do we have to talk?

3.  What is needed as a result of our talking?

4.  What is the decision-making method?

5.   What is the agenda (the series of questions we will answer) to discuss the issue?

6.  Where will this go from here?  What is the context?

**Questions to ask when deciding how to decide:**
- What is the issue?  What exactly needs to be decided?
- Who is the appropriate person/group to make the decision?
- What is the process for making this decision? (be careful not to get into the discussion now, you are just developing the *process*, e.g.: first we gather this information, then we have this meeting, then we bring in this person, then we. . . )

# Sample Agenda #2 (Ideal)

7:00    Overview of the purpose of the meeting
        Overview of the agenda

7:10    Where are the highlights of activity in the district?
- Where does the Superintendent have concerns?
- Where is there notable progress?

7:25    What does the external monitoring report indicate about the preparedness of our students for college, vo-tech, and work?

- What were the results for the report?  (:30)

- What conclusions can we draw about the effectiveness of our schools? (:30)

- Do we need to investigate anything further and if so how will that get done? (:20)

- Do we need to make any changes in our ends policies or our executive limitations and if so what will be the process for preparing the board for this discussion? (:20)

9:15    What should be the agenda for our next meeting?

9:30    Adjourn

# Ground Rules That Increase Cool Inquiry and Group Learning

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| 1. Stay open to influence – be willing to move your stake. | One of the obligations of "being at the table" is that your intention is not to *win* the argument, but to find the *best* argument. That means being completely open to changing your point of view as logic and evidence gets surfaced in the course of the discussion. |
| 2. Don't just advocate. Inquire into what others think. | Because we have points of view that we believe are *right* (otherwise why would we have the point of view), we spend a disproportionate amount of our time *advocating* our position—explaining and re-explaining why we have come to our position. A conversation is much more robust when you can alter this dynamic by not only describing why you have come to your position, but also inquiring into why another person hold the view that they do. In this way you can begin to understand the *origin* of the difference and are far better able to resolve or manage it. |
| 3. Put your reasoning on the table, not just your conclusion. | Often we come to groups having spent a great deal of time thinking through our positions. This is all part of being thoughtful and prepared for the meeting. However, it also presents the problem of us believing that our thoughts are *complete* and that all is necessary is for others to listen and agree. To ensure productive conversation, we need to *suspend* our thinking before the group—meaning: <br><br> a) Hang our thinking out in front of the group for them to "observe." <br> b) Let go of our interest in our thinking being unchanged—suspend our attachment to our conclusions. |

| 4. Define what important words mean. | Often we use the same words with different meanings, which causes us to think we agree when we don't.  Or we use different words with the same meanings, which causes us to think we disagree when we don't.  This results in what can sometimes be called "violent agreement."<br><br>In order to ensure that we actually *agree* it is important to ensure that we have shared meaning about the words that we use. Often lack of common agreement on words as simple as "it", "we", and "them" cause the greatest confusion. |
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| 5. Test assumptions and mental models. | All our our thinking and conclusions rest on a set of assumptions we hold to be true. These assumptions are often so *obvious* to us that we don't even know they exist or they seem outside the need for scrutiny. We need to make our assumptions visible to ensure that they are shared and that they are valid.  Also, trying on a different set of assumptions can often lead to breakthroughs in our thinking.  For example, if someone said, "Let's just look at this problem and assume we could work non-competitively with people serving the same customer" might seem ludicrous, but lead to new ways of thinking.<br><br>The point isn't that our assumptions are right or wrong, the point is that they are largely invisible to us and therefore control our thinking in ways that are unhelpful. |

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| 6. Listen in order to understand, not in order to debate.  Listening does not mean waiting. | When someone else is talking it is critical to the thinking of the group that everyone be listening to *understand* the meaning of what they are saying.  You need to be able to understand it so well that you are able to articulate it in your own words. Only then is it possible to truly disagree (or agree) with them. Often we are so anxious to state our own point of view that we *wait* while the person is talking.  If you are jotting down your own thoughts, waving your hand to be called on, or engaging in a side conversation at the table it is impossible for you to be listening. If you are afraid that you will forget the point you are making, jot down a word or two that will "hold" your thought so you can attend to what your colleague is conveying. |
| 7. Use data to inform decisions. | Your experience is one piece of data, but it is often not the whole story.  When there is empirical data to support or weaken an argument it must be put on the table.  It is a betrayal of the group to withhold evidence that weakens your position. |
| 8. Have the discussions and disagreements in the meeting, not outside the meeting. | When a group is making a decision, or is part of a decision making process, the group *must* have access to all the information.  If you have a point to make about the content of the discussion or the process being used, telling someone outside the meeting is not helpful to the group.  The group cannot deal with information they don't have.  This includes your concerns that the group is going off-track, that certain ideas or members are dominating, that a certain piece of data is being discounted, or *whatever*.  Complaining about it in "the parking lot" is betraying your obligations to the group. |

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| 9. Be brief.  No war stories.  Don't repeat. | In order for the group to listen to what you are saying, you need to make it as brief as possible.  Burying your thoughts in stories when the idea has been sufficiently conveyed stretched the ability of the group to listen and wastes their time.  If you are struggling to get your ideas out, that is one thing.  But if you keep repeating your point in order to be persuasive it is not helpful to the group's deliberations. |
| 10. Focus on interests, not positions. | When we think through an idea we frequently come up with a solution, which we present to the group, but we neglect to share our *interests* that the position satisfies.  Sometimes we don't even realize what our interests are, we just think the solution would work.<br><br>It is very helpful to the group if you can "back out" of your position by reflecting on *why* you like this particular solution (e.g.: because it reduces expenses, because it has great public relations potential, because no one else is doing it).  Those are your *interests* which, when stated, increase the likelihood that solutions can be crafted that meet a *set* of interests held by the group and the conversation can be *generative* in crafting solutions rather than *competitive* in selling established positions. |
| 11. S-L-O-W down the discussion. | Keeping the pace of the discussion slow, so that people don't need to raise their hands or jump in at the end of someone's sentence is a barometer that the other groundrules are being me.  When a conversation speeds up it is evidence that listening is not occurring, people are not suspending their thinking, etc. |
| 12.  Focus on strategic, board level issues | Often  boards get drawn into deliberations |

| | about issues because they are interesting, controversial, urgent, or because the executive asks them to.  None of these are criteria useful for ensuring the board operates at the highest level.  Before deliberating (or while in the middle of a deliberation) ask:  is this governing work? |
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## About the Speaker

Susan Edsall presented this workshop at the 2009 VSBA/VSA Annual Conference in October.  She is a private consultant working with not-for-profit organizations on large scale systems change including organizational culture, strategic planning, conflict resolution, team learning and board development.  She serves clients in New England and the west coast.

She co-authored a book on board governance titled Policy Governance Fieldbook, published by Jossey Bass and in June 2004 her memoir titled Into the Blue: A Father's Flight and a Daughter's Return  was published by St. Martin's Press.

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