



Notes on Leadership: Running a Good Meeting

One of the most important leadership skills is running a good meeting, yet this is a skill that is rarely taught. If you can run good meetings you will be sought after by your colleagues to take charge of a variety of projects, groups, and activities. As you read through the following simple guidelines, think back to a recent meeting that you didn't enjoy and see if one of these strategies would have made that meeting more successful.

Timing

It seems obvious, but it is very important to start your meeting on time, end it on time, and keep to time. No one enjoys sitting in a room waiting for others to show up before a meeting gets started. Waiting is a waste of time, and those who arrive late are being disrespectful of the value of other people's time. When I was department chair, we asked faculty-meeting latecomers to pay one dollar for every minute of tardiness; the proceeds were used to pay for department cookies. This may sound draconian, but people showed up right on time. Start your meetings on time and people will know that you mean business.

Ending a meeting on time is not always easy, but it is always appreciated. This requires moving an agenda forward and allotting the right amount of time to each item to be discussed. As meeting chair, it is your responsibility to keep discussions on topic and not let the discussion drift into other areas. If time permits, peripheral discussion can sometimes lead to new ideas, so it does not always need to be squelched. However, some people like to hear the sound of their own voices, and often these folks need help to stay on topic.

Agendas Are Essential

Agendas should be distributed in advance to ensure that participants know what will be discussed. By giving everyone a chance to think about issues in advance, time will be saved and

more will be accomplished. Meeting participants will have time to hatch great ideas for how to solve problems or identify important concerns that deserve additional consideration. When you draft an agenda, specify how much time will be needed to cover each topic. This will help make it possible for you to accomplish all that you hope to in the amount of time allotted.



Suzanne R. Pfeffer

Ensure Full Participation

Everyone feels good about meetings where their participation is encouraged and valued. First, does everyone know everyone else? At the beginning of your meeting,

go around the room and ask participants to introduce themselves by name and department or institution, and ask them to include some information about why they are present. For any group that does not meet regularly, use large-font name cards around the table because it is hard for participants to remember names. Addressing participants by name makes it easier for everyone to remember them next time and will help connect group members.

Now for the most important tip: Every group will have "loud" members and "quiet" members. Be sure to design some part of the meeting where each person sitting around the table is called upon to contribute his or her views. This ensures that even the quietest participant has everyone's attention for part of the meeting. These individuals will be grateful and they may have the best ideas, quietly waiting to be heard.

Food

Your group will become grumpy if they are hungry, and a grumpy group rarely finds consensus on any issue. Keep everyone happy with high-quality food—be it sandwiches, cookies, fruit, or whatever. A happy group is always more productive, and they will appreciate you as a meeting chair if you include that extra touch.

[S]tart your meeting on time, end it on time, and keep to time.

Manners

A colleague of mine who works at a small start-up company was horrified that meeting attendees were all focused on their Blackberry devices, texting away. It's one thing to check for an urgent message; it's quite another for participants to be completely distracted and not "present" for an important discussion. If you are in charge and want full participation, don't be shy about asking folks to put away their digital devices and close their computer screens. At the same time, be sure you are running an engaging meeting that is not boring—it may be your fault that participants are "tuning out." The worst scenario, of course, is when the person who is supposedly leading the meeting is using his/her own electronic device. This is inexcusable and is the phenotype of a meeting leader who will very soon be replaced.

Recap

After completing your agenda, be sure to summarize what was agreed upon and what was accomplished. Reaching a consensus is not always possible, but if you can help your group find a compromise solution, you will have added much value to the event. What are the next steps to be taken and who promised to do what? A good meeting summary will satisfy participants that their time was well spent and that their contributions made a difference. Solutions will not be forgotten, and an overview of next steps will keep the ball rolling and help your group continue to be effective and productive.

I hope you will find these tips valuable. Running an efficient meeting is appreciated at all levels, and will increase your popularity and skills as an effective leader. ■

—Suzanne R. Pfeffer for the Women in Cell Biology Committee

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WICB Mentoring Theater: Overwhelmed!

This article was inadvertently left out of the January/February ASCB Newsletter.

It is a common refrain: "I feel overwhelmed." How do some people manage to do so much while remaining calm and happy? Are they masters of illusion? This year's Women in Cell Biology (WICB) Mentoring Theater at the 2010 ASCB Annual Meeting delighted the audience with improv performances by Martha Cyert, Ted Hinchcliffe, Bev Wendland, and Zena Werb. After revealing some stunning stage talent in their caricatures of smart cell biologists who are not coping well, our thespians formed a panel for a lively Q&A session with the audience.

In "Too Many Cracks" we see Tanya at home on a Saturday morning. She is late with grading a stack of exams, there is a pile of unopened mail, there are dishes in the sink, the vet calls because Tanya forgot to pick up her dog, and she has neglected tasks promised to her daughter and to a friend. A phone call reveals that her -80°C freezer is beeping, but before she can deal with it another call comes in. As Tanya leaves the house she discovers that her car has been towed—the payment reminder is in the stack of unopened mail. Meanwhile, the freezer is forgotten, presumably to beep (and thaw) all weekend.

In contrast to Tanya's hectic life, "The Perfectionist" reveals a calm Josie working diligently, first by giving hours of assistance to

a remedial student, and then calmly focusing on finding the perfect phrasing for a sentence in a manuscript. We learn from several comic interactions that Josie's career is suffering because things don't get finished. Josie turns down an invitation for some obviously needed recreation because she needs to practice her lines for the WICB skits next month.

In the final skit, Bessie doesn't know "When to Say Yes." Bessie is clearly efficient, effective, and much in demand. We watch her fill her plate beyond capacity by agreeing to an amusing series of invitations. When her Chair pressures her to serve on the animal care committee, she doesn't know what to do. The audience voted for Bessie to say "No!" but shortly thereafter she receives an invitation to a conference exactly in her area of expertise and held in an exotic locale....

Following the skits, our talented thespians (and highly accomplished jugglers of many things) commented on issues raised and fielded questions from the audience. The interesting and informative discussion was wide-ranging and introduced diverse suggestions for decision making, time management, and organization. One theme that emerged was the importance of recognizing your own personal situation. Take charge of your life, but do it your way and have fun. ■

—Lynne Quarmby for the Women in Cell Biology Committee