



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Come to Order

How many of you want to go to more meetings? Do you want more of your time to be devoted to sitting at a table for hours, while someone keeps the minutes, that you are unlikely to ever read word for word – ever? Even worse, what about meetings you host that never seem to result in the outcome you desire? You can be either a victim or a perpetrator. Almost everyone has a horror story to tell about meeting management catastrophes.

Unless you are one of those rare individuals with lots of time on your hand, you cannot afford to be a participant in a meeting that is irrelevant, nonproductive, and time-consuming. This holds true whether you are an attendee, or the meetings' facilitator. You simply cannot afford to lose time because of a poorly managed meeting. It cannot often be made up by just working harder.

Why do we hold meetings in the first place? I propose that there are only four really good reasons. Three of these are relatively well known. The fourth is not as openly discussed, but exists nonetheless. They are: to distribute information; coordinate resources; and make decisions. The last is to build relationships.

For purposes of this column I would like to focus on you as a person who needs to hold meetings. If you're a chief officer you must periodically hold meetings to achieve one or more of the goals stated above. Your first decision is to decide what kind of meeting you're going to try to accomplish. If you are a novice in managing meetings, my advice is to try to do one thing at a time. As you develop expertise, you may be able to integrate different goals into a single agenda. A lot of that depends on how sophisticated the group is.

Here are the basic rules of running effective meetings. They are:

1. have a set of agreed upon ground rules in how the meeting is conducted;
2. Always have an agenda, preferably in writing for everyone to see;
3. Provide backup information well in advance;
4. Telegraph your intent of the outcome;
5. Balance input carefully; make sure everyone gets some air time;
6. Don't chase rabbits;
7. Start on time and end on time;
8. Maintain creature comforts;
9. Summarize input;
10. Define or describe the next steps to be taken on agenda items.



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Having a good set of ground rules primarily mean adopting one of the many parliamentary procedure processes that are for managing meetings. My favorite is Robert's rules of order I strongly recommend that anyone who works within the context of government to have their own personal copy I acquired mine is thoroughly as I was introduced to the concept of meetings. My original copy I purchased when I was a member of Toastmasters. Setting the expectations that there are some ground rules can be used to evaluate everyone's behavior early on. It leads to a lot less conflict later on.¹

Setting an agenda for each meeting is a powerful tool you can use the agenda to clearly identify what topics are to be discussed, but you can also telegraph your intention on the discussion each agenda item can have an attachment. Secondly, each can have a statement of intent, I. E. Information only, action item, etc. the agenda as a plan for the time you have allocated for the meeting. It allows you to make an estimate of the time that is to be allocated for each entry on the agenda. Providing a topic and a time frame (i.e. 30 minutes) indication on the agenda

The suggestion to provide comprehensive backup information well in advanced is to eliminate surprises. Be prepared with visual aids. Make sure that all of the duplicates are clear and the written materials are complete. Background materials should be set out in advance and when they are to be used should be distributed in a somewhat formal fashion.

Start the meeting with an agenda review. This telegraphs your expectations. Review the elements of the agenda and make sure that all of the resources are in order. Continually communicating your intent should emphasize outcomes whenever possible. It's okay to say "we are going to discuss a topic today, but will not be making a decision "this means that you're going to solicit input only – or vice versa the organization is going to have to wait to decide on this agenda item during a future timeframe.

It's not uncommon for meetings to result in one or more personalities trying to dominate the conversation. That is why you should be prepared to use the rules of engagement to make sure both majority and minority opinions are respected and heard. I've had people challenge me when I deliberately ask for opposition to the point of view. Some say that it diffuses the process as we engage in the debate. Others might feel that listening to a dissenting voice is a waste of time. My experience has been that by balancing input in meeting group, you can stay better focused on an acceptable solution.

Without balancing input, you can take the proverbial trip to Abilene that is mentioned in many management texts. Dissent is not always about opposition. It sometimes is about accuracy and relevancy.

¹ <http://robertsrules.com/>



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The next is one of the hardest things to that occurs in a meeting that you must avoid. That is chasing rabbits. This phenomenon happens when the group, because of dissent or misdirection, starts to go off point. Not uncommonly chasing rabbits starts with a war story and over involvement of personnel advocating a personal agenda. You know that chasing rabbits is causing you a problem when you observe that the group is beginning to lose interest and is turning away from the focus of the meeting. In all cases you must be diplomatic. You can recover from this rabbit chase by making sure that a certain action happens. When you recognize one person is dominating the discussion you need to diplomatically take control by reminding the group of the reason for the agenda item. Keep the group focused.

The idea that you start on time and stay on schedule and finish on time is more important than you know. Throughout the meeting you should periodically review where you are. Make notations regarding time elements. Personally, I like to have a large clock in the room and other references to how long the discussion has gone on to reduce the impact of me having to remind the group.

Creature comforts sounds like what it means. Making sure that ventilation, temperature and other comfort considerations are monitored is very important. Nothing will tank a meeting more than making people uncomfortable when they are trying to keep them on target.

Finally, as the meeting comes to an end of each topic summarize the outcome. Use terminology like "we have reviewed the recommendations of the XYZ committee and have come to the conclusion that (you finish that sentence)" Summaries are also helpful at the end of each agenda item for that provides an opportunity to mark the progress you have made in achieving change.

This leads to the last basic step of good meeting management. That is to define your next steps. This can, but may not always be, the prerogative of the chair. It it's your meeting you should be able to define some action you desire. In some cases the action steps may be to really do something or preparative for adoption the next steps our anticipation and proactive they focus upon the future.

Well, there you have it. The next time your Outlook says you have a meeting, you can begin to have a sense of whether the time is going to be a good use or not. In my opinion meeting management skills are underrated by many fire officers because we function with a command-and-control environment and tend to disregard the more subtle aspects of the management and leadership in the office environment. No - we don't use committees to fight fire. But, we certainly don't need a crisis in the meeting room when are trying to solve problems of how to operate our organizations on a day to day basis. This is a skill set that many of our most formidable leaders have developed into an art form.

Why not you too? ²

² <http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/roberts-rules-for-dummies-cheat-sheet.html>