

## Been to a Good Meeting Lately?\*

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Most counselors tend to view meetings as a necessary evil. In a survey of 400 school counselors, attending meetings was listed as their seventh greatest time robber (Partin, 1984). Meetings have a bad reputation, yet they are an unavoidable and essential part of every school counselor's job.

This refers not to individual and group counseling sessions, but to the myriad of committees, task forces, staff meetings, parent and teacher consultations, planning sessions, case conferences, and open discussions that consume a large portion of a counselor's calendar.

All meetings are not a waste of time; some of productive, creative, stimulative, informative, or morale boosting. Such outcomes do not occur by chance but because specific events happened that assured success. The unique training in communication skills, problem solving, and group dynamics equips counselors with skills that will prove invaluable in making meetings productive. The purpose of this article is to serve as a reminder of the counseling principles that make meetings work.

### Look for Alternatives to a Meeting

The easiest way to cut down on meeting time is to keep the number of meetings to a minimum. Too often, counselors attend or call meetings when the issues at hand could have been handled expeditiously in another fashion. If sharing information is the sole purpose of the meetings, consider using a memo or telephone call. The telephone conference call can save both time and money.

A democratic value system and sensitivity to other's viewpoints can entice counselors into the "paralysis of analysis," the inability to make even minor decisions without eliciting the opinion of everyone. Decisions that affect the lives of others or are costly must be considered carefully, yet in many cases, it would be just as effective



to make a decision yourself or ask someone else to decide.

Standing committees that have a regular meeting date should cancel their meetings if the business at hand does not require a meeting. The Delphi technique, in which a committee functions largely by written communication and surveys, has been adapted successfully by many organizations.

### Have an Agenda

Although spontaneity has its role in life, that generally is not the best way to run a meeting. An agenda will help focus the attention of a meeting's participants. It should be distributed in writing a day or two before the meeting if possible. Include not only an outline of topics, but also questions to be considered or background information that needs to be considered before the meeting. Invite advance preparation.

The agenda should reflect clear-cut goals for the meeting. Is it to share information, solve a problem, seek advice, or sell an idea? Clear-cut tasks convey a businesslike atmosphere and a respect for other people's time.

Too often, 80% of the meeting time is devoted to the items constituting only 20% in importance. Schedule the most important items first, lest they be hastily

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decided at the end of the meeting. Limit discussion time on less important items.

Guard against an overly ambitious agenda. A crowded agenda decreases the group's effectiveness, leaves participants frustrated, and wastes time.

### Begin on Time

Estimate how much time you have spent in the past year waiting for meetings to begin. Could that time have been better spent on other counseling-related tasks? If so, resolve to reduce your waiting time in the future? The world can be divided into two groups of people -- those who are early for everything and those who are habitually late. Waiting for all of the latecomers to arrive punishes those who are punctual.

If people expect a meeting to begin late, the normally punctual people begin arriving after the scheduled starting time. The absurdity of this is that the habitually late people must now come even later to preserve their reputations. Convey the expectation that the meeting will begin on time and then make sure it does. If you are not in charge of the meeting, suggest to the chairperson that the meeting begin. Those who arrived promptly will applaud you, and after a few such instances, even the habitual latecomers are more likely to arrive on time.

Send out the notice and agenda for the meeting stating the beginning and ending times. Try scheduling meetings to begin at off-hour times, such as 2:40 or 11:10. This conveys a more specific time than 2:00, which often gets interpreted as "twoish."

### Include Only Necessary People

Do you frequently sit through meetings wondering why you were there? Too often, meetings are called with little attention to who really needs to be there. Large-group meetings become a series of small-group discussions, involving only a few participants, while the others sit idly observing them.

Invite only those persons whose presence is directly related to the goals of the meeting. If someone's input is needed for one item on the agenda, have that

person attend only that part of the meeting. This is a sound practice for two reasons. It limits the size of group, and people may spend their time on tasks of higher priority. Unless the purpose of the meeting is primarily to share information or persuade, efficiency greatly diminishes once more than 10 or 12 people are included.

Attend only those meetings at which your presence is essential. If your input is needed for only a portion of the agenda, attend only that segment. If all else fails and you must attend a meeting in which you have little stake, take something to do. Work on your "to do" list or outline your correspondence.

### Select a Conducive Environment

Some forethought as to the meeting place can assure a more inviting atmosphere. The major criterion should be to have a place where interruptions can be kept to a minimum. Repeated interruptions may greatly impede the progress of a group, whether it is a counseling group or a formal meeting. Not only is the time of the distraction robbed, but the momentum is lost, and the group's attention must be refocused.

Seek a location that avoids traffic flow. Close the door and take your phone off the hook if the meeting is in your office. This communicates that you value the meeting and plan to give it your full attention. (Of course, this can't be done if the phone line is shared.) If you are fortunate enough to have a secretary, inform him or her to interrupt only for emergencies.

Give consideration to the physical attributes of your meeting site. Is the temperature comfortable? Most people find 68-69 degrees to be most conducive to mental activity.

Rearrange the chairs to fit the purpose of the meeting. Move empty chairs out of the way. If you seek interaction, form a circle. Follow the lead of fast-food restaurants and avoid overly comfortable chairs; this can lead to inertia -- a body at rest tends to remain at rest.

Indeed, for some brief, informal meetings you may choose not to have chairs

at all. Stand. It will keep interaction brief and to the point. Why have a 20-minute session if you have a 5-minute task? What else could you be doing with that time that might have a greater payoff for you, your students, and the school?

### Keep the Meeting on Task

If I were king or superintendent, whichever is higher, I would mandate that throughout the land there must be displayed in every meeting room a clock, not with the traditional numerals reflecting the hours, but rather with a face recording the cumulative salary of every person sitting in that room. Thus, everyone would clearly recognize that a 100-minute digression on last week's football game cost this organization \$180.

Time is money; at least when it comes to calling professional meetings. Whenever someone decides to call a meeting of 5 or 10 paid staff members, a decision was made to allocate that portion of the organization's resources. A counselor in a meeting cannot at the same time be counseling a student; a teacher cannot be teaching, tutoring, or planning a lesson. In some instances, the organization and the student are better served by the meeting, but in others it is a misplaced priority. Time is finite; therefore, it is the counselor's (and teacher's or administrator's) most precious resource. Choose well where it shall be invested.

Use your counseling skills to keep meetings on task and follow a predetermined agenda. If someone begins to digress, inject gatekeeping questions such as "What do we need to decide today?" or "What are our options?" to refocus the group's attention. Summarize significant points, paraphrase crucial points and confront discrepancies in the discussion. Counselors have at their disposal a variety of effective communication techniques that can be used to play a valuable leadership role in any group, even when the counselor is not the designated chairperson. A counselor's training in group dynamics should be used to help with task groups. Observe the group process and intervene when necessary to invite full participation.

Although consensus in every group decision is not essential, you can intervene to assure that all viewpoints are aired. Solicit the contributions of silent members. Be especially sensitive to the nonverbal or nonparticipating people and tactfully but assertively, quell the overly dominant member.

Remain sensitive to the hidden agendas that participants may bring to the meeting. Some observers believe that every meeting occurs at two levels. Hidden conflicts, unrelated to the meeting agenda, can greatly influence the group process. Remember that the spoken reasons are not always the real reasons for or against an issue.

### Record Progress

It is essential to keep a written account of the discussion, especially in problem-solving groups. At the minimum, informal notes should be taken by one person, to serve as the group memory. Decision making can proceed in a more orderly way if a visual display of the process is available. This may take the form of writing lists on newsprint or chalkboard. Seeing one idea written may stimulate another.

Making a storyboard on notecards or using flowcharts or the diagrams from the Program and Evaluation Review Technique have proven to be valuable techniques for recording and stimulating group problem solving. Such written stimuli are especially valuable if the group must continue the meeting at a later time.

Someone should be assigned to summarize the decisions made (not necessarily a woman!), if not in formal minutes, in a brief memorandum to all the participants. It is also helpful to include a list of any responsibilities assigned to specific members for follow-up action. If the group is meeting again, include the meeting time and agenda.

### End on Time

Remember Parkinson's Law -- "Work expands to fill the time available." Except in genuine emergencies, avoid open-ended meetings. A specific ending time

should be agreed on at the beginning. Everyone is more likely to stay on task if they know that the meeting will conclude at a specific time. One technique for forcing meetings to tend on time is to schedule your meetings back-to-back. At the beginning, indicate that you have another meeting scheduled and the time it must begin. As time approaches for the next meeting, announce that you have another appointment or meeting and must be excused.

If your group plans to meet again, try to set the time for your next meeting

before this meeting adjourns. It will be a lot easier than trying to coordinate each member's schedule later.

Two heads can be better than one. When channeled constructively, the group process can be a source of valuable creativity and may even increase morale and the sense of community. The group process cannot be left to random chance, however. The specific skills described above can assure that your meetings are more likely to be productive and perhaps even fun.

Partin, R. L. (1984). A School Counselor's Time -- Where Does it Go? *Ohio Personnel and Guidance Association Guidelines*, 11(2), 4.



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He is the author of five books and numerous journal articles in the areas of time management, goal setting, creative problem solving, stress management, and effective teaching skills. His most popular book, *The Classroom Teacher's Survival Guide*, was recently released in Spanish – despite the fact his vocabulary is limited to “dos tacos.”

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