

## MAKING MEETINGS WORK

Meetings pose problems for leaders and participants alike. Approached with hope, optimism and reasonable enthusiasm, meetings frequently result in disappointment. Yet, this situation need not exist. If meeting leaders use some easy to apply procedures, they can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their meetings.

### *Meetings can achieve several purposes:*

1. *They can unify a group.* Meetings allow everyone to have the same information, hear it at the same time, and respond to it the same way. Common information gives a group similar understanding and investment. When a consensus is achieved on an issue, problem or procedure, unity is intensified.
2. *They can be used to develop leadership.* Meetings can develop leadership skills and qualities in participants when they are allowed to share responsibility for sections of the agenda and to lead portions of the meeting. Meeting leaders who wish to develop leadership responsibility in others must remember that many opportunities must be provided for members to feel that the responsibility is theirs.
3. *They can be opportunities for sharing ideas.* While this is an obvious purpose of meetings, the true potential for the sharing of ideas is rarely realized. Some participants choose to observe rather than contribute. To accomplish this objective, meeting leaders need to employ specific structures to facilitate involvement and sharing.
4. *They can be used to solve problems.* This is usually a primary purpose for meetings, since organizations abound with problems that need solving. As with the sharing ideas, however, problems are more often discussed than solved. Again, specific structures need to be used for serious problems to be analyzed and appropriately solved.
5. *They can be used to plan.* Planning is an essential organizational function. However, the agendas of many meetings focus too closely only on present problems. When groups allow time to focus on more distant objectives and plan for them, they frequently see present problems in a different perspective.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS

An individual meeting may achieve any or all of these purposes. However, a successful meeting leader will make sure his meeting plan is designated to meet the purposes he chooses. Here are some useful criteria and techniques that will help a meeting leader gain more control over his meetings, help him to increase the

effectiveness of the meetings, and provide those attending the meeting with feelings of success and accomplishment.

1. Survey for agenda items. Allowing participants to contribute agenda items in advance of the meeting increases their investment in the content of the meeting and prevents the meeting leader from being overloaded with responsibility for "his" meeting. When surveying for agenda items, focus the suggesting individual by asking for the outcome needed, the time needed, the information that should be provided to group members and who will be concerned with the item.
2. Give prominent time and position in the agenda for items of concern to the majority. Meeting leaders err when they give prominence to their own concerns rather than those of the meeting participants. In order to insure maximum participation, it is helpful to test for agreement of items, and, when making a choice, to emphasize items of general concern. Items that do not concern a majority of the group may be treated separately.
3. Write down information items and distribute in advance of the meeting. This will minimize the time spent sharing information and making announcements. Items treated in this manner can then be dispensed with quickly by providing time for clarifying questions and comments.
4. Mail information, recommendations, and the like for important decision items in advance. Since meeting time should be used for making decisions and solving problems as much as possible, this will help limit time spent providing background information and making explanations.
5. Divide into groups as often as necessary. This consideration is especially important when there are several issues of limited interest and concern. By dividing into small groups (three to five participants), several items of interest can be dealt with simultaneously. Then reports can be made to the total group. A similar procedure may be used to achieve greater participation when an important item is being discussed or various solutions need to be tested. Occasional groupings can provide structural variety to a meeting, as well as increase efficiency.
6. Evaluate each meeting and act on improvements. The more formally evaluations are implemented, the more successful they are likely to be. It is helpful to provide specific questions such as "what was successful about this meeting?" "what suggestions for improvement would you make?" If done by questionnaire, the results should be shared with the participants in an appropriate manner. In any case, the wise leader will implement possible changes immediately. It would be better not to evaluate at all than to ignore the implications of the evaluation. Changes made as the result of evaluations tend to increase participant investment in group goals and procedures.