

Staff Meetings— an Organizational Must!

What five ingredients should every nonprofit staff meeting include?

BY ALEXANDER ALLPORT

Incredible as it may seem, some nonprofit organizations don't hold regular staff meetings. Others call meetings so infrequently that only the most significant announcement, usually a disaster, warrants gathering this key group into one room.

The litany of excuses is long. "Too time consuming" is one of the most frequent; experience shows the time will quickly be repaid in higher productivity and lower absenteeism. "Not everyone is present at the same time" is one of the most legitimate; staff meetings do require a regular schedule and careful planning. "Little is accomplished" is one of the most erroneous; not everything can be measured in immediate results. "Junior staff members are not interest-

ed" is one that needs to be changed; how do they expect to be promoted if they don't get involved? "We tried that once and it did not work" is one of the most ridiculous. Applied to other aspects of one's personal or professional life it would preclude success in any effort. Regularly scheduled meetings of an organization's staff are like the distributor in a carburetor. They help an organization's parts work in synch. No single factor—not even that rare blessing, an abundance of money—can contribute as much to the harmonious operation of an organization.

WHEN SHOULD YOU MEET?

No two organizations will want to follow the same pattern of staff meetings. For some, once a month may be adequate, at least at first. For others, once a week will prove essential, at least during the busiest time of the year. If held less than once a month, staff meetings would hardly be considered regular. If needed more than once a week, they suggest a lack of appropriate planning. Somewhere between those two extremes is right for most organizations.

While no one day of the week is perfect, some are not appropriate, such as Friday, when people are finishing up the week, or Monday, when they are just wrapping their minds around the work ahead. Tuesday works well—enough

into the week so that everybody can be present, physically and mentally, and early enough to provide time to tackle urgent tasks before the week is out.

The choice of time is also important. Nine in the morning is probably too early. Four in the afternoon is equally thoughtless, serving only to add to the stress of finishing the day. Ten o'clock, or 10:30, works well, creating a convenient, almost automatic cut-off when lunch time rolls around. Some organizations prefer lunchtime for their meetings and encourage attendance by providing an attractive sandwich platter for every-

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12 Reasons to Hold Regular Staff Meetings

Regular, well-run staff meetings perform many valuable functions for any nonprofit organization:

- ONE** They contribute to a positive spirit among those working for the same cause.
- TWO** They prevent the sense of isolation that develops when staff members work alone on separate projects.
- THREE** They enable staff members to step in for their colleagues when unforeseen or extended absences occur.
- FOUR** They stimulate useful ideas about how to deal with problems and how to improve the handling of routine, ongoing situations.
- FIVE** They make everyone feel they are being given equal and fair treatment on matters concerning their work.
- SIX** They reduce friction, giving staff members an appropriate forum to air their professional differences and seek a resolution.
- SEVEN** They provide an agreed-upon policy context for additional working meetings of individual staff members.
- EIGHT** They allow each staff member to learn about the organization's work and receive instruction in a supportive environment.
- NINE** They inform the executive director on all aspects of the organization and facilitate reporting to the board of directors.
- TEN** They demonstrate to the board that the organization is well run and that everyone is participating in its success.
- ELEVEN** They encourage personal growth and motivate each staff member to do the best job possible.
- TWELVE** They provide good "word-of-mouth" publicity about the organization, through its employees, helping the organization to prosper and succeed.

With all these reasons, how can anyone resist?

one. Sometimes meetings can alternate between lunchtime and office hours, depending on the issues to be discussed and the convenience of participants.

WHAT SHOULD YOU INCLUDE?

Unfortunately, some managers approach staff meetings as an opportunity to lecture staff on what they should be doing, and what they have done wrong. Others see them as gabfests, without structure or procedures. Neither is correct. Everyone must have a clear idea of what to expect from each staff meeting. Only then can people come prepared and leave feeling their time has been well spent.

An agenda, circulated in advance of the meeting, is useful. The more staff members contribute to the agenda, the more they identify with the meeting and make it their own. When the agenda is

Staff meeting reports should never follow an order of seniority.

prepared only by “management,” even when well intentioned, it usually leaves off issues important to staff. Advance consultation on the agenda pays off in a more receptive and purposeful meeting.

Staff members must understand what they are to bring to the meeting and what results they wish to see. The

executive director must be clear on which topics are appropriate for discussion, and which are not. For example, policy issues need to be brought before the board, not the staff.

Every staff meeting should include the following five components:

1. A Sharing Component

The chairperson should let each participant share some interesting, important, or even troubling event for the interest or amusement of others. Usually this sharing component involves only a few minutes at the start of each meeting. It can be seen as an icebreaker, a chance for individuals to know each other better. Obviously, the chairperson must keep a firm hand over this part of the proceedings. Otherwise, the entire time can be consumed with trivial, even if fascinating, personal anecdotes.

10 Tips for Successful Staff Meetings

- ONE** Hold meetings on a regular basis—at least once a month.
- TWO** Prepare an agenda before each meeting, with input from all staff.
- THREE** Be sure your meetings are as open as possible and that everyone contributes something.
- FOUR** Avoid hierarchical seating or order of presentation.
- FIVE** Ask someone to keep a record of all decisions made and tasks assigned at the meeting.
- SIX** Devote some time to letting staff share personal anecdotes and get to know one another better.
- SEVEN** Make sure all staff report on their current and future projects.
- EIGHT** At each meeting, set aside time for different staff members to describe their roles so that everyone learns to understand the organization as a whole.
- NINE** Ask everyone to bring a calendar to the meeting so that projects and events can be scheduled.
- TEN** Before you end each meeting, take time to pull loose ends together, finalize decisions, assign responsibility for tasks, and resolve any conflicts.

2. A Reporting Component

The reporting function is the heart of the staff meeting. During this phase, the chairperson encourages participants to discuss work in progress, recently completed projects, and goals. Discussion should focus on projects which may interact or impinge on the work of others. Not everything is equally interesting or important to everyone else. With practice, staff will learn what needs to be discussed together and what is only a private concern.

It's useful to think about the order in which these reports are given. Follow a sequence that helps people see related projects as a whole and appreciate the organization's total involvement. Never follow an order of seniority. Such a hierarchical order reinforces differences among staff rather than their common interest in the organization. On the other hand, don't let the order become routine from one meeting to another. Mix it up. Solicit early participation from younger staff or from someone involved with an unusual project. (Even the role of chair can be rotated.)

The important thing is to make sure that everyone reports—even if the report lasts only 30 seconds. Take care that meetings are not divided between talkers and silent types or, worse, between those who are willing to share information and those who cling to it.

3. A Coordinating Component

This is where the chairperson needs to shine. It's during this phase that loose ends must be brought together and decisions made. The chair must synthesize different perspectives and make sure that conflicts are resolved. Programs competing for the same resources must be modified or rescheduled. Sometimes a stop or hold must be placed on projects pending further clearance with the board.

This task of coordination is not easy. But dealing with these problems in staff meetings assures that the organization's work will run smoothly. It

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keeps staff members from wasting time and energy as they complete their tasks.

To make coordination easier, ask staff members to bring their calendars to the meeting. This will give everyone a chance to jot down coming events and will help prevent scheduling conflicts. Also, ask someone to keep a record of all decisions made during the meeting. People can refer to this record at subsequent meetings and use it to track projects.

4. A Directing Component

Few organizations function solely on consensus. Sooner or later someone has to tell someone else—albeit in a supportive and egalitarian way—to just “do it.” The executive director usually must take the initiative to make staff assignments and assign responsibility for tasks. Another way is to encourage staff to pick up on what needs to be done, offering their “I'll do that” when and where it is needed.

Again, it is important that someone in the staff meeting be assigned to make notes of who agreed to do what. Such a record will prevent duplication of effort and help you track individual performance on organizational endeavors.

5. A Learning Component

There are often opportunities for one staff member to inform others about an issue that concerns them all. For

example, the organization may be preparing for an audit or an annual event in which everyone will be involved. This learning component is particularly important during the first year of regular staff meetings, and when new people join the organization.

Also, set aside a portion of the meeting to have staff members explain their roles in the organization. Before each meeting, ask a different staff member to prepare such a description. Over time, everyone will gain an increasing familiarity with all aspects of the organization. This knowledge will enable staff to fill in for each other during unexpected or extended absences. It will also increase everyone's enthusiasm, unity, appreciation for one another, and wisdom about the organization.

NO MORE EXCUSES

Successful staff meetings take thought, planning, and sound execution. But there is no excuse for not holding such meetings regularly. Nonprofit employees have a major stake in the organization and make a vital contribution to it. They have a right to share the decision-making process. ■

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