Planning Meeting Agendas

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Meeting agendas have many benefits, yet surprisingly few leaders take the time to plan and circulate an agenda ahead of time. This publication will help group leaders construct, disseminate and use an effective meeting agenda.

Do your meetings have a specific agenda? If they have one, is it merely a listing of topics? Are the members aware of the agenda? Do the first items on the agenda get lengthy discussion and the last little, if any? Are items frequently dropped from the discussion, forgotten or tabled until the next meeting because the members have worn out or the time has run out? Planning an agenda requires careful thought before the meeting. It takes time and effort. But a carefully planned agenda can help prevent these common meeting problems and can serve a number of other important functions as well. The functions are those that improve meeting efficiency and group communication.

Meeting efficiency functions
- The agenda lets both members and leaders know what has been accomplished and what remains to be accomplished.

- It permits adequate consideration of all agenda items.

- It keeps discussion on track, preventing introduction of extraneous items.

Communication functions
- The agenda helps maintain the organization by planning to meet the needs of all members.

- If circulated between meetings, the agenda helps maintain communication among members.

- It helps everyone understand what concerns are to be addressed and what action is to be taken on each.

- It helps members and others decide if they're interested in attending.

- If circulated before the meeting, the agenda allows members time to prepare to participate more effectively at the meeting.

- It allows a carefully planned climate to occur.

With all of an agenda's benefits, it is surprising that few leaders take the time to plan and circulate agendas. For many meetings, the agenda exists only in the chairperson's head.

Follow these five steps for planning meeting agendas:

Step 1-Gather items to be covered
Items to he covered come from a variety of sources. As a group leader, you are aware of old business items from previous meetings that need to be covered. Most groups have committee reports that must he included in the agenda. You may already be thinking of new business items that should be considered. Additional ideas for new business may come from other group members, state or national levels of your organization and from other interests in the community.

Involving members in this item-gathering step is very important. People are more likely to be committed to activities they help plan, including group meetings. Members can be involved through agenda planning committees. Members can also be involved through mailed or telephone surveys asking what items they would like to see included at the meeting.

Step 2—Consider member needs
In addition to the business items that help the group accomplish its tasks, you should include activities that help maintain the group. Different people are interested in different things. Try to anticipate which topics and activities will interest individual members. Then, plan activities that will interest as many as possible at each meeting.

If you cannot pack everyone's interests into one meeting, make sure everyone's interests get addressed at future meetings.

Arnold Bateman lists the following member needs and suggested group activities to meet these needs.

Need	Activity
to contribute	goal setting, program planning, subcommittees
companionship	ice breakers, refreshments, informal social period
recognition	news releases, awards, programs, announcements, thank-yous
pride	leadership positions
mental stimulation	educational programs, discussion of new or controversial topics

Consideration of member needs includes planning time on the agenda to set the climate of the meeting. The climate is affected by the physical surroundings, the room arrangement and room temperature. It also is affected by the patterns of greeting, opportunities for informal socializing, and involvement or lack of involvement during the meeting.

Climate setting establishes the mood for the meeting. It helps people clear their minds of extraneous thoughts and mentally prepare themselves for activities to follow. It can help create an atmosphere of trust in which everyone feels comfortable and he or she can contribute fully and safely.

Planning a refreshment and informal discussion period at the beginning of the meeting sets a pleasant climate. It also allows you to start the business portion of the meeting on time with everyone present by providing a "time cushion" for latecomers.

Step 3—Decide action and responsibility

Once you have gathered all the items that might be covered and have considered member needs, you can list each item or activity, decide what action needs to be taken on it and who will be responsible for it. Indicating what action will be taken on an item helps members prepare for the action. If, by receiving the agenda in advance, a member is alerted that an important decision will be reached, he will have time to prepare his position before the meeting. You can also estimate the amount of time each will require. The planning sheet No. 1 is a guide to help you think through the process.

Step 4—Assign time slots

Having filled out Planning Sheet No. 1, you may find you won't have time to do everything. Physicians have determined that adult productivity falls off sharply after sitting for two and a half hours. You should accomplish all your activities and deal with all agenda items within this time frame, better yet, in two hours (especially if the chairs are hard!). Your agenda will have to be carefully planned and followed if you are to accomplish all your meeting goals within this time frame.

If everything won't fit, you will have to establish priorities and delay other items until a later meeting, assign them to committees or drop them altogether. A word of caution: The temptation may be to drop the climate-setting and socializing activities. Try to resist. Such activities are vital to the maintenance of most groups.

Tropman suggests using a bell-shaped agenda in which items are arranged in order of difficulty. He recommends starting with simple items to warm the group for the most difficult items, dealing with the difficult items next, and then tapering off with easier subjects toward the end of the meeting. This plan warms the group to the tasks at hand so it can accomplish the tasks, then cools the group before adjourning (see Planning Sheet 2).

PLANNING SHEET 1

Topic or activity	Which members will be interested?	What action needs to be taken (committee established, report decision?)	Who will handle the meeting?	Meeting time required

Step 5—Print and mail

The agenda should he mailed to members at least two weeks before the meeting. This helps maintain communication between leaders and members. It also permits members to prepare so they all participate more effectively in the meetings. It allows them time to research items, discuss matters with others ahead of time and develop positions on agenda items.

Step 6—At the meeting

Even if the agenda has been distributed in advance, it is a good idea to bring enough agenda sheets for each member at the meeting. Review the planned agenda at the beginning of the meeting. Agree on additions or alterations and time allotments per item.

Finally, follow the agenda, sticking closely to planned times in the meeting. Be sure all items on the agenda ARE discussed; items not on the agenda are NOT discussed. Start on time, end on time.
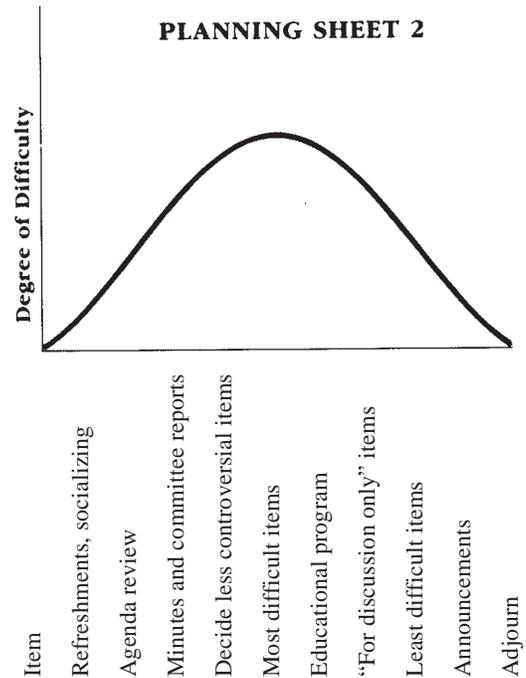
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Cole, Jacquelyn M. and F. Maurice. *Advisory Councils.* Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1983.

Schindler-Rainman, Eva and Ronald Lippert. *Taking Your Meetings Out of the Doldrums*. University Associates, San Diego, Calif., 1975.

Tropman, John E. *Effective Meetings*. Sage Publications. Beverly Hills, Calif., 1980.

PLANNING SHEET 2

Degree of Difficulty

Item:
Refreshments, socializing
Agenda review
Minutes and committee reports
Decide less controversial items
Most difficult items
Educational program
"For discussion only" items
Least difficult items
Announcements
Adjourn

SAMPLE AGENDA SHEET

Type of meeting:

Time:

Place:

Time allotted	Item	Action Required	Who is reponsible?
7:00	1		
	2		
	3		
	4		
	5		
	6		
9:00	Adjourn		

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