

Ingredients of a Good Team Meeting

At Camden Community Hospital (a fictional hospital), Shana, a senior RN, is leading a team meeting to discuss standardizing the handoff of patients between shifts. She quickly looks over the team members, who are chatting among themselves, some not very quietly. “May I have your attention, please,” she says. Some stop talking and others keep on. She raps her hand on the table and now she has everyone’s attention. “I think you know why we all are here,” she adds, although some have no clue. Finally she figures out that some do not understand why the meeting was called, what the goals are and other details. She fills these team members in while those who are prepared become restless and start talking among themselves again, thus disrupting the process of the meeting.

Does this seem like one of your typical meetings? If so, the productivity of your meetings is probably quite low and may be frustrating to many of the participants. One of my fellow colleagues complained not too long ago that she found one of the most irritating things about her tenure as a department head of one of the clinical divisions at a local hospital was the innumerable meetings in which very little was accomplished. Fortunately, much can be done to improve team meetings.

Based upon my experience in working with a variety of teams in a variety of settings and based upon discussions with colleagues along with research, I believe that there are several elements that are necessary for effective team meetings. These are:

- Strong leadership
- Preparation
- An agenda
- Staying focused
- Participation by all team members
- Decision rules
- A time limit

Leadership. This is the most important of the elements. A leader is responsible for seeing that many of the other elements are present. A good leader has several qualities which insure successful meetings. When I picture these to myself I think of one of the leaders of the local United Way. I have served on several teams which she has led. I find that she is above all very positive. She has the respect of the team members as she always seems to keep them involved and keeps meetings moving forward; there are rarely any of the problems present as illustrated in the opening story with Shana. At every meeting she makes sure the goals set forth are accomplished. I leave the meetings believing that I have played an important part.

Preparation. Team members should have information that is relevant to the meeting. In the United Way meetings mentioned above the leader would send out a packet of information to be read in preparation for the coming meeting or there would be instructions on what to do with information that we had received at the previous meeting.

Most of the time there would be minutes included of the previous meeting. This way, little time would have to be spent reviewing the accomplishments of the previous meeting during the scheduled meeting. Rather, the team could work to accomplish the goals set for that particular meeting.

An agenda. Ideally, the agenda of the meeting should be sent out ahead of the meeting so that team members know what to expect. A county prevention coalition of which I am a member has very good agendas for each of its monthly meetings. It lists the start time of the meeting. The first items each month are approval of minutes and agenda. Following that are reports on recent accomplishments. New business and projects are addressed next. With this standard routine those at the meeting are clear on what to expect. It may not be exciting but the work gets done.

Staying focused. With the help of an agenda a strong leader can make sure the team members stay on task. If any stray or start having side conversations which are disruptive the leader should remind the members that they need to stay focused as everyone's opinion and input is valuable.

Participation by all team members. New teams sometimes have members who do not willingly participate. Also, new members of existing teams sometimes feel shy, until they become familiar with everyone. In other teams a few members can dominate the discussion and others feel shut out. As a chair of a committee I strove to overcome these blockades by soliciting opinions directly from team members. For instance, "Amy, what do you think we should have on this page of our website?"

Decision rules. It should be clear to members of a team how decisions are made. I know of some teams where the leader says something such as, "Well, it looks to me that everyone agrees that we should adopt this standard working process. So, that's how we will proceed with patient billing in the future." The problem here is that it may not be clear that all agree. The simplest way to adopt a new process or other item is to have a vote with simple majority passing the proposal.

A time limit. Good meetings not only begin on time but they also end at a scheduled time. With time constraints in place team members and leaders are more likely to stay focused and complete the work in the agenda. With a firm time limit team members can feel comfortable making plans for other tasks or other work after the meeting. Ending on time is a matter of respect for the team members, allowing them to productively plan their day.

Leaders of teams and team members should question whether their meetings are productive. It is important that they be. I believe that by using the above elements as guidelines much more can be accomplished by teams that are struggling to accomplish significant goals in their meetings. It may not be possible to accomplish each benchmark at first but with effort most can be achieved and the productivity and moral of teams will greatly improve.