



by Barry Cooney

Are Meetings Taking Minutes and Wasting Hours?

There is no question whatsoever that meetings are a built-in part of almost every working environment. Some people would say that all they do, day in, and day out, is go from one meeting to the next. It often seems that one's attendance at meetings becomes more important than the actual purpose of the meeting itself. Research suggests that corporate America is awash in meetings, and more importantly, that they go on far too long with not too much accomplished. However, if an organization thinks carefully about the purpose and structure of meetings, they can serve as a useful tool for planning, problem solving, information exchange, strategic dialogue, and much more.

The difficulty with meetings, in general, is that there is basically no strict adherence to how they should be managed, or to defining the real purpose of the meeting itself. As a result, meetings frequently become boring and repetitive rituals for bringing people together and allowing them to vent their frustrations, joke with colleagues or engage in long winded, purposeless monologues with no real thought behind spoken words. One of the worst types of meetings that reflect these characteristics are the so-called "staff meetings," which bring together department directors, usually in once a week gatherings. The usual format consists of each person "checking-in" and talking about what's happening in their department. You can bet that if something "serious" is brewing, or if the department has a reputation for being highly dysfunctional, the director will inform the group that "I have nothing to report."

The fundamental elements of managing a meeting are simple. The difficult part is getting people to follow them. Let's look at a few of these guidelines as a form of "self-assessment" of how meetings are conducted at your casino.

Do you have a formal agenda? Agendas consist of the things you want to discuss. Ideally, they should be listed in priority order, with the most important item first. If the subject matter is of critical importance chances are it should be the only item on the agenda.

Has adequate information been provided to each attendee in advance of the meeting? Attempts to solve problems or address issues of real importance require a fundamental background knowledge of the issues or problems. Many attendees lack this knowledge, which means that people have to be brought up to speed before the subject matter can be acted upon. More often than not, just getting people familiar with an issue can take up all the meeting time, if not more. Providing as much

information in advance to meeting participants, along with the proviso that this information must be read prior to the meeting, will serve to establish an immediate sense of clarity and purpose.

Are the right people in attendance? It's important that all the key players be present when issues are being discussed. Granted that it's not always possible to do this, nevertheless a concerted effort should be made to make sure that the right people are present when certain issues are discussed. If they are not present, then it's usually a waste of time to bring the matter to the table. Also, bear in mind that the size of the group is another important factor. Too many people bog down discussion, which is a good way to go nowhere, fast. Small group discussions with participants who are well versed on the subject and have the authority to enact decisions will get the job done in a way that best serves the organization.

Have you set an accurate length of time to address your agenda issues? It's clear that some meetings should only last thirty minutes or less, while others require much more time. The standard one hour meeting is more of an outgrowth of old habits rather than strategic thinking. If agenda items can be addressed in ten minutes, then the meeting should be ten minutes in length. There is no need to stretch things out to an hour. Hopefully, there are matters of more importance that could be attended to. Conversely, if an issue is complex then multiple meetings should be considered, in which that issue is the only one on the agenda.

Are you holding people accountable for the actions taken at meetings? Coming to clear decisions is one thing, holding people accountable for them is another matter entirely. If certain actions are taken by attendees, who is responsible for getting it done, and by what dates? These things should be confirmed. Usually, this can be done in a follow-up memo to all participants. The important thing is that it needs to be done! Otherwise, everyone will have their own perception about who was asked to be responsible for "such and such" a matter at some unspecified time in the future.

Much of the success of a meeting is determined by how it is conducted. Having an "open" meeting with no designated leader only works if each participant is totally "on purpose" and they have a proven track record of getting things done.

Unfortunately, this kind of group dynamic is rare. This means that whoever is in charge of the meeting has to know when to cut someone off, or when to allow a discussion to play itself out, carefully evaluating the pros and cons of the matter in question. Conducting effective meetings is challenging, and not all GMs or department directors are suited for the task. In such cases, it's often wiser to appoint someone to run the meeting, or to have a rotational schedule of different directors taking charge. This last strategy has the added effect of sharpening the meeting director's skills in both preparing for the meeting, and leading a productive discussion.

Meetings can serve a wide variety of purposes. Some are clear and apparent, while others are quite subtle. For example, most people, when asked, would say that the primary purposes of meetings are to share information, solve problems, achieve group consensus, review progress, or engender support and direction for future projects or activities. All well and good. But, in truth, for the effective manager meetings can serve many purposes. For example, meetings can be an effective way to introduce up and coming managers to the kind of dialogues they will be exposed to when they reach the executive ranks. They can also provide a forum for upper managers to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their subordinates.

Meetings can also be an effective device for creating a sense of enthusiasm for an upcoming project or promotion. Likewise, meetings can serve as an objective arena for evaluating people's opinions about potential change initiatives or new programs. In short, meetings can accomplish many things, all of which depend upon the quality and astuteness of the people in charge. Meetings, more than any other group element within an organization, reflect the nature of its operating culture. Casinos that run well and have strong internal structures almost always have purposeful meetings, whereas those that are fragmented and highly dysfunctional, find themselves going to an endless array of poorly run, purposeless gatherings, whose only function is to take minutes and waste hours.

Casinos that fall into this latter category would be well advised to engage the assistance of external experts who understand how to structure effective meetings and develop strong meeting facilitators. And why is this so important? The answer is simple. Time is too valuable a commodity to squander. ♣

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