Research Brief

Productive Meetings for School Improvement

Question: How can principals assure that their meetings are productive?

In A Nutshell

Meetings are an essential part of school life and a key strategy for school improvement. However, they are often unproductive, wasteful and meaningless for teachers and principals.   Excellent meetings have a clear purpose, an explicit agenda with identified action items, involve the right people, and create a congenial climate that engages participants. Meetings can also be an important part of the school's professional development activity and a source of growth for everyone involved.

Summary of Findings:

"Nobody knows when the first meeting took place, or why, but it's a safe bet that the meeting seemed too long to some participants, poorly organized to others, boring to at least a few, and it's likely that some were disappointed with the result" (Streibel, 2003).

Meetings have such a bad reputation, that Patrick Lencioni, author of *Death By Meeting*, says that meetings are one of the top-ranked reasons that executives complain about their jobs. For most executives, including school leaders, saying "I'd like this job if it weren't for the meetings," is like a surgeon saying, "this is a good job except for the operations," or a conductor saying, "I'd love this work except for the concerts." For educational leaders, meetings aren't just part of the job, they are the job. It's the venue in which goals are set, plans are made, and things get done. Why, then, when meetings are so critical to our success, are they so universally vilified?

According to most organizational development research, people hate meetings because they are so bad – badly planned, badly organized, and badly run. Fortunately, the ways to fix bad meetings are clear, concrete, and easy to manage, as long as school leaders invest a bit of time in this very important leadership tool.

Meetings are expensive. They cost, time, money and energy that can be directed to other leadership functions. If they are not used wisely, the result is wasted resources, angry staff members, and lost opportunities for real school improvement.

Effective Meetings
According to virtually all of the research on meetings, productive meetings have several key features in common:

A Clear Purpose - Meetings should never be used to deliver announcements that can be provided in other ways – through emails other networking technologies. Every meeting should have a purpose, and the leader should be able to state it clearly. Before scheduling a meeting, the principal should fill in the following blank: "the purpose of this meeting is to _____." Unless that purpose calls for face-to-face contact, there is no reason to have a meeting.

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<u>A Clear Agenda</u> - The agenda not only identifies the topics to be considered, but, in the most sophisticated settings, the desired outcome and the time allocated for the topic. For example, the agenda item "New Technology for Department Offices" might list the outcome as "Information from the IT Department" and "30 minutes" as a reasonable time allocation. This establishes a clear expectation that the agenda item is an information session and that it will have a clear time limit. Other outcomes might include a "decision" on a new program or "discussion" of a school-wide problem or issue.

<u>Key People</u> - Meetings should include the key people needed to make things happen – those who have the information, interest and authority to get the job done. Each agenda item should list the key contact person, and, to the extent possible, that person should lead the discussion or give the information that is necessary.

<u>Engaging Activity</u> - Meetings don't have to be circuses, but they do have to engage participants in thought, discussion, or other activity. Since faculty meetings typically occur at the end of a long teaching day, developing engaging activities is particularly important in schools.

<u>Refreshments</u> - It may sound trite, but in our culture, congenial gatherings are often associated with food and beverages. While they should not be the centerpiece of the meeting, unless it's an end-of-year celebration of some kind, healthy, high-energy nourishment will actually improve productivity in meetings.

Critical Questions
Before scheduling a meeting, principals need to ask some critical questions.
1. What do I want to accomplish? Principals should state, as clearly as possible, what the outcome of the meeting should be. What will the "product" look like? What will "success" look like? Is there any part of this outcome that can be accomplished more effectively in another way?

2. Is this meeting really necessary?   Is there a better way to accomplish our goal? Will a smaller meeting work just as well? Can a small group work on an idea and bring it to the larger group?

3. Are the right people involved? There is nothing more frustrating for a group than coming up with a great idea only to find out that the person with the final authority is not there to participate.   Are the key players going to be present? Will they be prepared to move the idea forward?

4. Do we have the information and resources we need? There is no point in discussing a topic or trying to make a decision if all of the information is not available. Similarly, it is not possible to develop strategies and solutions unless everyone knows what resources are available to the group to solve the problem or advance the program.

Alternative Purposes
Sometimes, especially in schools, meetings are scheduled because they must be. They are required by contract, they are traditional, or they are just part of the school's routine. In all of these cases, leaders struggle to bring purpose and meaning to these ritual gatherings.

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One solution may be to "repurpose" these meetings – find other ways to use the time together to advance school goals. Some current innovations in education require faculty gatherings, so required faculty meetings may prove to be a great way to launch new initiatives that are linked to student learning and achievement.

Learning Communities - A faculty learning community is predicated on the notion that organizations can learn and improve their performance based on information and discussion. "Learning Community" meetings might include the examination and discussion of school data, a book or article about teaching and learning that everyone has read, or a brief presentation about an innovation or novel idea for school improvement. These activities work best when they are facilitated by someone who is well-versed in the information and who is seen as a peer by the faculty.

Lesson Study - Based on a professional development approach used by Japanese teachers, the Lesson Study protocol engages teachers in the examination and discussion of specific instructional strategies and lessons used by their colleagues. Sometimes, these involve classroom observations, but they can also be very productive if they focus on lesson plans and learning materials.

Excellent resources for leading lesson study activities are available from the following organizations:
- Research for Better Schools. http://rbs/prg/Special-Topics/Lesson-Study/22/
- Lesson Study Tools from Columbia University. http://www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/tools/html
- *International Journal of Teaching and Learning In Higher Education.* http://www.istel.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE110.pdf
- Education Northwest: Lesson Study Facilitator's Guide http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/1132
- PDFTop, Compendium of Resouces on Lesson Study . http://www.pdftop.com/ebook/model+lesson+study/

Looking at Student Work - Research has shown that when teachers examine student work collaboratively, they are better able to set performance standards, link instruction to clear standards, and evaluate student performance consistently and accurately. The "Looking at Student Work" protocol provides for the systematic review of student products and allows faculty to establish consistent expectations across subjects and grade levels.

Excellent resources for leading "Looking at Student Work" (LASW) activities include:
- From the Coalition of Essential Schools, *Looking Collaboratively at Student Work: An Essential Toolkit,* http://www.essentialschools.org/resources/60
- Looking at Student Work. Org. http://www.lasw.org/

The following resources provide concrete, specific guidance on conducting productive meetings that can be used with confidence by principals who must organize and run large faculty or parent meetings. Many of these materials can also be used to train teachers to plan and organize effective department and team meetings as well. Meetings are critical components of school change, so it is important that all key

players in the high school environment know how to manage and participate in the kind of meetings that bring about meaningful school improvement.

Online Resources:

Organizing Staff Meetings Even YOU Want to Attend By Ellen Delisio.
http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin518.shtml
Do you run your staff meetings like press briefings -- that is, read the news and run? More principals should use faculty meetings as opportunities for problem-solving and professional development, according to Sheila and John Eller, authors of *Energizing Staff Meetings*. Included: suggestions for energizing staff meetings.

Top 7 Strategies for Productive Meetings By Kevin Kearn.
http://top7business.com/?id=867
Seven great ideas drawn from organizational development literature for how to run effective meetings. Although written for business environments, these strategies can be applied directly to school staff meetings as well. The style is succinct and engaging, and this article may be the perfect topic for a meeting: "how to make our meetings better."

Running Effective Meetings From Mindtools.com
http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/RunningMeetings.htm
This excellent article lays out the critical elements of successful meetings. It is particularly useful for advance planning since it provides a series of questions principals should ask *themselves* while the planning the meeting.

Positive and Productive Meetings
From http://positiveproductivemeetings.com/
This website showcases a clever model for planning and conducting great meetings. It is well-suited to schools because of the multitude of talents that exist within any high school faculty. Most important, it includes downloadable tools to analyze what's working (and not) in the meetings your staff attends and how you spend (or squander) your meeting time.

How to Become a Masterful Meeting Leader By Marie McIntyre
http://www.yourofficecoach.com/Topics/leading_a_productive_meeting.htm
A step-by-step guide for planning and conducting productive meetings. This article, from Your Office Coach, is one of many excellent leadership resources provided by that organization. You can also follow their latest work on Twitter, Facebook or through email sign-up.

How to Run a Productive Staff Meeting By Nora Beane
http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/273237/how_to_run_a_productive_staff_meeting.html?cat=3
From Associated Content, this essay by the director of religious education for a large church outlines some of the special meeting needs of educational and nonprofit organizations. Sensible, clear, and down to earth, this article provides a very succinct version of some very comprehensive information.

Effective Meetings Produce Results: Tips for Meeting Management By Susan M. Heathfield
http://humanresources.about.com/od/meetingmanagement/a/meetings_work.htm

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This very comprehensive and useful article is divided into three sections:
- Tips for Meeting Planning
- Tips for Meeting Implementation
- Tips for Meeting Follow-up and Success

For each section, very explicit guidance is provided to help assure high quality, results-oriented meetings. The section on follow-up is especially important for school leaders to help assure that things get done after the meeting.

Surviving Faculty Meetings   By Lee Tobin McLain
http://chronicle.com/article/Surviving-Faculty-Meetings/46524/
This humorous account, written by a college faculty member, is painfully similar to high school faculty meetings as well. For principals, it helps to explain why some participants do what they do in meetings; it's mostly an attempt to preserve their sanity!

Planning and Preparing for Faculty Meetings
By Matthew Jennings in *Leading Effective Meetings, Teams and Work Groups in Districts and Schools*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Retrieved from:
http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/107088/chapters/Planning-and-Preparing-for-Faculty-Meetings.aspx
This excellent first chapter from Mr. Jennings' book lays out very explicit guidance for planning and organizing faculty meetings for maximum productivity and satisfaction. He proposes excellent strategies for organizing work groups inside of the larger meeting to assure that all voices are heard and that real progress is made. The sample notices and agendas provided are particularly helpful to show how his model works in action.

Consensus – How to and Why. By Neil Corcoran, Michigan State University
https://www.msu.edu/~corcora5/org/consensus.html
An excellent overview of the art and science of consensus building, and how to produce consensus in diverse settings.

A Short Guide to Consensus Building.
Public Disputes Program, Harvard Law School http://web.mit.edu/publicdisputes/practice/cbh_ch1.html
It may be short, but it's very comprehensive. This excellent guide gives great advice on how to deal with dissent and disagreement in contentious settings.

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