Productive Staff Meetings

Rather than just assuming that it is possible to have “productive staff meeting,” some would suggest that there is a prior, and more significant, question. Namely, why meet in the first place, particularly if there is just two full-time staff? Why not just gather at the coffee pot and attend to the business-at-hand as needed? Such an approach, while less time consuming initially, ignores the reality that time invested in building a cohesive and functional staff will provide a foundation for collegial efforts over the long haul and in times of crisis and high stress.

Put another way, the purpose of staff meetings is to provide staff members a mostly unhurried opportunity to worship, pray, plan, decide, debate, inform and dream together in order to further the congregation’s vision, mission and values.

In short, the potential benefits are many when staff-mates regularly have invested prime time in one another and their common endeavors. These benefits include:

- Being on the same page.
- Having a sense of trust.
- Being informed about salient aspects of the congregation’s life.
- Having a feeling of being valued.
- Having a place to explore one’s faith.
- Knowing where one’s colleagues are coming from.
- Having a learning partner who values competence and growth as a leader.
- Being with people who will provide support and hold one accountable.
- Being able to celebrate successes and failures with respected colleague(s).

And so much more.

The Over-arching Meeting Structure: Five Kinds of Meeting Times

There are multiple models for how and when staffs choose to meet. One that covers a year’s time contains five interlinking types of meeting:

- **Daily check-in:** Usual length is 5-10 minutes unless a crisis necessitates a longer interchange.
- **Weekly staff meeting:** Usual length is 60-75 minutes on a mutually agreeable day of the week, most often in the late morning.
- **Monthly Extended Staff Meeting:** Usual length is 120-180 minutes in a mutually agreeable setting often involving a significant study component.
- **Semi-annual Performance Review**: Usual length is 90-120 minutes once every six months in which the pastor and second staff worker focus on how one’s ministry is going within the framework of one’s personal and professional objectives and the continuing education growth plan.

- **Annual Off-site Retreat**: Usual length is two days at a setting that provides meals, confidentiality, and a refreshing atmosphere. Major components include a significant study period, a year-end review of strategic congregational initiatives, an annual performance review, planning for the coming year, recreational opportunities, and other experiences the staff values.

### Ten Hints for a Productive Staff Meeting

Even though some people dread staff meetings, a thoughtfully run, crisply organized, well-focused meeting can be a very edifying and informative experience. But such experiences take time, energy, and planning. They do not just happen when people of good intention and a worthy mission sit down together.

As one goes about planning and organizing a staff meeting, whether for an hour or for several days, it is important to create a professional yet meaningful set of activities that deal with substantive matters. To foster productive staff meetings, the following 10 hints lend themselves to those who attend and those who will lead:

1. **It's everybody's meeting** – Even though one person may finally set the agenda and run the meeting, it is not the pastor’s or someone else’s meeting. Each member of the staff has a stake in fostering a setting and experience in which actions are initiated that enrich and strengthen those the staff serves.

2. **Agenda is shared ahead of time** – People like to know how they are going to be spending their time. They also like to know what is going to be discussed so that they can think and pray about the matters before the staff as well as prepare adequately to contribute to the discussion and decision-making process.

3. **Come rested and positive** – There are few things more disappointing than being in a meeting with someone who is fatigued, not thinking straight, negative and feeling highly stressed. Such a person’s capacity to be open reflective, and flexible is limited and the likelihood of misunderstanding and conflict is heightened.

4. **Begin on time and end on time** – Time is precious. A clear statement of valuing another staff person is to honor one’s commitment to be on time. Incumbent upon the meeting leader is the responsibility to launch the meeting on time and make sure that people are able to leave around the promised ending time.

5. **Have an agenda with a set pattern** – Some staffs have a meeting agenda built around the their covenant; others around the congregation’s critical targets; and still others around something like prayer, calendar checking, action items, personal and professional issues, and other matters of concern. Regardless of how a staff finally chooses to organize its agenda, it is vital that there be some cogent pattern that fosters productive meetings.
6. **Distill updates and reports while aiming for action** – Long, drawn-out information-sharing by staff can create inattention and resentment. If staff can keep updates and reports lean and informative, more time is available to take on recommendations and issues begging for a decision.

7. **Keep meetings well-paced** – As the saying goes, it is helpful to “keep things moving.” On the other hand, it is vital not to rush through things in a way that leave people breathless and scrambling to understand. If there is a particularly “heavy” topic surround it on the agenda with lighter, less demanding topics.

8. **Adhere to the meeting ground rules** – Some staffs create meeting norms that guide their behavior when interacting (i.e., no item may occupy over 25% of the meeting time). Others just develop a set of understandings or ground rules that guide their meetings (i.e., if an issue in a staff member’s area of responsibility is going to brought up that staff member should be informed of that fact prior to the meeting).

9. **Bring closure to discussion** – When a staff discussion goes on and on with no termination in sight, people can get restless. They can also wonder whether other items are going to get attention that day. Critical to sound staff meeting leadership is the ability to intervene in wandering commentary, summarize prior points of view, and bring the matter under discussion to an appropriate conclusion.

10. **Access meeting outcomes and processes while looking ahead** – Productive staffs regularly step back and ask how well they are working together. They are not afraid to speak openly with each other about how productive their meetings are. They also make sure that when the meeting concludes, people know who is responsible for the various “to dos” that surfaced in the meetings.

A current management best-seller by Patrick Lencioni is entitled, “Death by Meeting.” Preposterous? Not really. Meetings can give life to, or take the life right out of, a team. Productive, substantive, well-sequenced meetings are not perfect happenings; rather, they are events focused, to best of a staff’s ability, on pursuing how best God’s people can be equipped for ministry by congregational staff and lay leaders.