

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF COUNTY EXTENSION MEETINGS



Walter A Barker, *Extension Specialist, 4-H & Youth Programs*
Elizabeth W Curry, *Extension Specialist, FACS*

The tradition of Extension is business often is conducted in a meeting setting. Extension work is often defined as meetings, and Extension professionals often log several hours of meetings monthly. By understanding some of the basic elements of meetings, a meeting can be shortened or eliminated. This publication will serve as a guideline to help Extension professionals in the role of convener, determine whether such meeting is necessary, and how to arrange for more effective meetings.

Meetings can be of two types - “planned” and “unplanned.” Avoid “unplanned” meetings as much as possible. These can be either impromptu meetings at the request of others, or a planned meeting for which there was not adequate time to prepare. These can be risky and stressful and often expose agents to unforeseen situations. “Planned” meetings bring results and are rewarding because there is an opportunity to define the purpose and avoid unfavorable outcomes.

WHAT IS A MEETING?

A meeting occurs when a group of individuals, sharing common values and objectives, come together to see how they can accomplish the shared objectives. *An effective meeting* focuses on the outcome of the objective, satisfaction of participants, effective time management, and participants are motivated to act. Frequently when meetings are held, topics are discussed and little thought is given in how to meet the desired outcomes identified in the pre-meeting agenda.

Typically, individuals or groups meet to either receive information or decide on a course of action. Informational meetings usually have one of two purposes: to relay information, such as updating members or customers of what is going on with a project or activity; or to introduce members to new and different information, such as introducing a new procedure. If, on the other hand the purpose for the meeting is decision making, it may involve problem solving or goal setting.

TO MEET/NOT TO MEET?

A trap many are often caught in is not thinking as to whether a meeting should be held. In Extension, we are oriented to making everyone happy, so we go ahead and schedule a meeting because the committee wants to meet, or because that is what has always been done. Stop and ask, “Is this a good use of time?” Is a meeting the most appropriate and most effective communication tool available?”

Here is a test to see whether or not the group needs to meet. In asking several key questions the answer *to meet* or *not to meet* will emerge.

“TO MEET” TEST

When deciding whether to hold a meeting, here are some sample questions to help with the decision process:

For Informational Meetings:

- Is a meeting the only way to give or receive this information?*
- Is a meeting the best means for giving and/or receiving this information?*
- Is a meeting the best use of time?*

For Goal-Setting / Decision-Making Meetings:

- Is a meeting the best way to make decisions or set goals?*
- Is group discussion/interaction needed in order to make the decision?*
- Is a meeting the appropriate way to make these decisions or set goals?*
- Is a meeting the best use of time?*

One might be tempted to say yes to all the questions, thus justifying the need for a meeting. But wait! Look at some alternatives for giving and receiving information. Information can be given through:

Informational: Typically informational meetings are designed for one-way communication.

Memo - Short note, usually on one topic.

Pitfall: If used too frequently or exclusively, receivers tend to ignore them.

Newsletters - Gives general information usually on a variety of related subjects.

Pitfall: Level of information can be too general or too scientific and lacks personal interaction.

Circular - Usually one page, for quick reading and targeted for audience and topic.

Pitfall: Too general and often overlooked by receivers as “junk” mail.

Phone Conference - A phone call with a number of individuals.

Pitfall: Expensive, cannot read faces to support the comments.

E-mail - Quick and inexpensive.

Pitfall: Everyone does not have e-mail, nor do they check it on a regular basis.

Looking at these options, the answer to meet solely for the purpose of receiving or giving information becomes a NO. As long as there are alternatives to meetings, it is in the best interest of everyone to check out other options.

Goal Setting/Decision Making:

Requires interaction and communication among members, unlike informational meetings, which may not require group interaction. The success of Goal-Setting/Decision-Making meetings depends on the interaction among individuals within the group, as members exchange personal ideas and develop these into group ideas.

ALTERNATIVES:

Phone Conferences - A phone call with a number of individuals on the call together.

Pitfall: Expensive, cannot read faces to support the comments and harder to maintain group focus.

Chat Rooms - All participants have the opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas simultaneously via inter/intranet.

Pitfall: Time factor; system limitation and outside distraction, lack of non-verbal communication.

Committee - A small part of a larger group, usually with a specific assignment.

Pitfall: Limited point of view, more meetings, sharing of information.

Is there an alternative to meeting for decision making and/or goal setting? Group decision making and goal setting both require discussion to be effective. Is there another alternative to meeting, yet allows for discussion?

DECISION TO MEET - NOW WHAT?

There are several things to consider when the need to hold a meeting is established. The expectation of all meetings should be to achieve success and motivate participants to act. Quite often individuals feel that attendance of a particular meeting is not the best use of their time. However, if adequate plans and strategies to carry out the meetings are followed, everyone attending feels satisfied. Items that lead to successful meetings include:

1. There should be a clear *statement of purpose*. For example: "The Get Ready Organization will meet on Y2K to develop operational policies."
2. Next, be sure that *key people are available to participate*. One of the greatest challenges is to get all the key individuals together for a meeting, because of meeting time demands. Individuals are influenced by their past experience; if meetings in the past have been ineffective and/or inefficient, participants will weigh this before participating again.
3. A related issue is *timing* - timing is as important as the meeting itself. If no one can come to the meeting, failure is guaranteed. The timing must be convenient to the targeted individuals. This is always a difficult task; although with time and knowing the audience, the most opportune time can be pin-pointed.

4. *An objective for the meeting* is important and helps keep the focus to obtain outcomes.
5. *Physical layout* - There is often a tendency for agents to hold meetings in their offices. It may be better to select a place away from the work environment or usual meeting place. Whatever the location, the facilities should be the best possible. Facilities may differ from location to location and hence be flexible. At the very least, the location should have the basic minimum basic expectations - good lighting, rooms, handicap accessible, clean restrooms, etc. Certain set-up features are necessary for certain outcomes. Consider room arrangement possibilities that will enhance the outcome of the meeting.
6. *Equipment* - If using audio/visual equipment at the meeting site, set it up early. Make sure it works and all participants can see and hear. Can the room be dimmed enough to see visuals, is there proper electrical outlets? It usually is better to avoid using equipment if it is inadequate for the setting. The best laid plans can go astray - extra projector bulbs and extension cords should be available.
7. *Role assignment* - It is always good to assign roles to the participants prior to the meeting. People then feel a responsibility to attend. It also shows that everyone is involved and creates a sense of ownership. People are more likely to get involved if they have contributed to an event or activity. Becoming part-owners allows them to be more committed ensuring that an activity is successful.
8. *Agenda* - This is critically important. It is the road map to the activities planned for the meeting. It also helps everyone to stay on track by allowing them to see the items being covered and the time frame.
9. *Review* - At the meeting's conclusion, it is a good idea to recap the major points brought up at the meeting and to list them according to importance.
10. *Action (Follow-up) plan* - Actions to be followed up on are based on the outcome of discussions and decisions coming from the meeting agenda. Listing responsibilities for follow-up action is important, allow time for individuals to volunteer and record assignments. If participants are encouraged to take part in the follow up there is a strong likelihood they will buy into the general outcomes *Build in time on the agenda for this process*; it sets the base for the next meeting as well as establishes impact.

MOST ESSENTIAL THINGS TO DO

As the convener of the meeting, many things you do prior to the meeting affect the outcome of the meeting.

- a. Plan to be at the meeting location at least 30 minutes in advance.
- b. Mail agenda of the pertinent information ahead to participants.
- c. Start and adjourn on time.
- d. Plan on items to be handled.
- e. Remember the little things - it is always a good idea to include some sort of refreshment if the number of individuals in attendance is more than 5, or if the meeting is expected to last longer than an hour. This is not a rule for meetings, but adds surprise. It also allows participants time to relax and to connect socially outside of business,

while making the transition to the purpose of the meeting. Have scheduled breaks if the meeting is expected to run several hours.

THE MAJOR COMPONENTS OF A MEETING

Here are suggestions for improved operation of meetings.

Guidelines:

1. *Start meetings on time* - the rule of thumb is to start on time and you'll end on time. When this continues to happen, it becomes the standard.
2. *Give housekeeping details up front* - such as where to find restrooms, water fountains, and emergency exits, etc.
3. *Stay focused on the purpose of the meeting* - getting off course is a factor that can extend meetings beyond the planned time. It's always best to remind and draw the audience back to the purpose of the meeting when the tendency to go off course becomes eminent.
4. *Seek opinions* - that is one of the reasons for the meeting in the first place - don't hesitate to do this. However, take care not to let only one or a few dominate this process. Recognize the presence of everyone and encourage their full participation.
5. *Evaluate view points* - for clarity, correctness and relevance to the topic.
6. *Summarize* - it is always a good thing to recap the thoughts and opinions before closing the meeting. This provides clarity, correctness and relevance. Sometimes it may be helpful to have a tape recorder to capture ideas and opinions. Tape recorders can be intimidating, but there are ways to introduce their use so that members are less intimidated. It is also important to *seek permission* before the use of a recorder. Most of all, respect the wishes of those who want their opinion to be off the record or anonymous. One good way to introduce a tape recorder to a meeting is by saying, "*We value your ideas and opinions. To avoid missing anything that is said, may we use a recorder to capture all thoughts?*"
7. *Follow-up plans* - seldom are follow-up plans ever developed before the meeting closes. This results in nothing being accomplished and encourages what is most often said about meetings, "We have had so many meetings and nothing seems to happen." It also adds frustrations to upcoming meetings when action from a previous meeting has not been followed up. Some agenda time should be devoted toward a follow-up plan. "*Now that we have these excellent ideas and opinions we agreed on, let's discuss where we go from here.*" Take time to develop a specific follow-up plan and the rewards will be great.

Structure:

1. *Have an agenda.* The key to productive meetings that make maximum use of meeting time is a well planned agenda. It keeps the meeting on track and helps cover the purpose and topics to be discussed. Ask for additional agenda items.
2. *State the purpose* - it is always a good idea to restate the purpose at the beginning of the meeting. It reminds participants of their purpose and involvement.

3. *Manage time* - time seems to get away when individuals are involved in activities. Applying time to agenda items may help to stay on schedule. This is not always true, especially if the focus of the meeting is not kept in mind.
4. *Have a good recording system* - as mentioned earlier, sometimes the best recorder may be a tape recorder. Remember the above cautions if one is going to be used. A tape recorder does not eliminate the use of someone else taking notes. It just compliments whatever note-taking system there is. Be prepared to have a transcriptionist to prepare the results. (This can be an expensive venture and is not recommended for all meetings. It works well in discussion on policy and critical issues.)
5. *Make role assignments* - this can happen before, during, and at the end of the meeting. It is best used when planning or assigning individuals to the “follow-up plan” of the meeting.
6. *Develop ground rules* - a very important tool for several reasons: maintains order, keeps meeting on course and provides a framework of norms of the group inter-action. *Ground rules* should be used when groups are going to spend several hours together or will be meeting on a regular basis. It is important to set ground rules the first time the group meets, i.e. - Respect other individuals opinions; meet only 2 hours at a time.

Interaction:

1. *Monitor participation* - monitoring is simple, it means making sure that all participants have the opportunity to take part in the discussion.
2. *Encourage participation* - the more often one speaks at a meeting, the more satisfied one feels about the success of the meeting. Greet all members as they arrive and introduce them to each other. Name tags or table tents are helpful with a new group. It is good to have an appropriate opening activity at the beginning of the meeting.
3. *Encourage dialog* - ask questions; break the larger group into smaller groups for discussions.
4. *Facilitate conflict* - groups that handle conflict instead of sidestepping it tend to be stronger groups with a better bond and working relationship.
5. *Probe for reactions and feelings* - ask questions and observe reactions.
6. *Encourage feedback* - gives one the opportunity to see the effectiveness of meetings. It is always important to solicit feedback from all parties attending.
7. Identify and share successes.

BRINGING CLOSURE TO MEETINGS

Before closing a meeting it is always best to thank everyone. Let them know their time and efforts are appreciated. At the same time, allow time for feedback on the entire meeting. Ask questions that would improve future meetings. Verbal communication is good, so always aim for the best way of getting this feedback. When using a questionnaire, make it short and specific to the things needed to improve future meetings. Time may not permit an individual to complete the questionnaire at the end of the meeting, so have self-addressed envelopes available.

Here is an example of a meeting evaluation questionnaire which will help the conveyer determine how participants responded to the overall meeting atmosphere.

Your comments are important. Please take 5 minutes to tell us how we are doing.

This questionnaire contains ten statements. To the right of each statement are numbers that describe your feelings about the meeting. Please circle the number to the right that best fit your feelings.

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
THE ENVIRONMENT					
The Chairman was warm and courteous.	1	2	3	4	5
The Chairman greeted the participants by name.	1	2	3	4	5
The time and place of the meeting was appropriate.	1	2	3	4	5
The atmosphere of the environment was warm/friendly.	1	2	3	4	5
THE OVERALL MEETING					
I felt the meeting was a success.	1	2	3	4	5
Everyone was asked to contribute in the discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
There was great respect for everyone attending.	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with how much was accomplished.	1	2	3	4	5

Much of the effectiveness of a meeting is predetermined by what happens in the planning stages. A meeting leader can seldom control all the elements that occur in the meeting, so it is best to go in as prepared as possible. Go for a “planned” meeting so that follow-up discussion will set the stage for the next meeting being a success.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If you would like to learn more about effective meetings, listed below are resources you may find informative:

Clark, Jonathan & Susan. (1992). *Prioritize, Organize the Art of Getting It Done*. National Press Publication, Shawnee Mission, Kansas.

Frank, Milo O. (1989). *How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half The Time*. Simon and Schuster, New York City, New York.

Heartland Center for Leadership Development. *12 Skills for Leaders of Meetings*.

Morley, C.L. (1994). *How to Get the Most out of Meetings*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia.

Shelton, M.M. & Laurie, K. Bauer. (1994). *Secrets of Highly Effective Meetings*. Sage Publication.

Toastmaster International. *Be Prepared For Meetings: How to Lead Productive Business Meetings Study Guide*. Kantola Productions, Millvalley, California.

Walker, K. et al. (1999). *LEADS Curriculum Notebook*. Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.