

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Improving Our Meetings – Effective Use of the Agenda

Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

I hate meetings. At least I usually do. Actually, I have disliked most of the meetings I've had to attend throughout my life – including many of the meetings I have led. In conversations with pastors and church leaders I have discovered that most of them hate their meetings, too.

If meetings are so poorly liked, why do we have so many of them? The answer is quite simple – meetings remain the best option for most people to effectively come together to plan, work on, discuss and decide most of the important matters before them. Yet, most of the leaders I know endure ineffective and poorly organized meetings month after month – apparently under the assumption that nothing can be done to improve them. Yet, there are many easily implemented strategies that can make our time together more efficient and effective and, dare I say it, fun. Efficient, effective and fun meetings? That's something to talk about.

Here are some of the more frequent irritations about church leadership/staff meetings that you and I hear:

- We don't start or end on time.
- We go so late or long that we are exhausted near the end and make bad decisions.
- Our meetings seem to lack purpose.
- We try to squeeze in too many significant issues into a single meeting.
- We don't know what we are going to talk about or intend to decide until we get there.
- Our meetings seem to wander from topic to topic without coming to any real conclusions.
- We leave important decisions undecided, and don't get back to them.

- We spend a lot of time on unimportant stuff and never seem to have time for the important stuff.

I want to suggest that creating and using a meeting agenda effectively can significantly resolve these problems and many others. Here are some things you may want to talk about.

- Do we print and use an agenda for every meeting? Do we use the agenda to manage our time and the flow of our work together?
- Does every meeting have a purpose? Can we describe that purpose?
- Do we publish and adhere to meeting start times? Do we publish anticipated ending times and hold ourselves accountable to end “on time?” Do we have time targets for each item or area of work on the agenda?
- Would we cancel a regularly-scheduled meeting (e.g. weekly, monthly) if there were no significant issues to address?
- Do we differentiate between items that we need to discuss and those requiring a decision?
- Do we publish the agenda in time for attendees to review material and prepare for any discussions or decisions to be made, or do attendees discover the agenda when they arrive at the meeting? How many days before the meeting should the agenda be published?
- Do we schedule the important stuff first and handle the more routine items later when mental or physical fatigue may not be as big an issue?
- Do we record in our minutes or meeting notes items to be carried over to later meetings (I like to call this section the “parking lot” – a place where ideas go for a while but are not forgotten) and include them in subsequent agendas?
- In recent years, our elders have lumped routine items and reports into a “consent agenda” which elders review prior to the meeting and, if there are no questions, they are approved together in one motion. We then move on to more substantive issues. This may help move your meetings along, but only if attendees are committed to actually reviewing the documents prior to the meeting. It doesn’t work with lazy or unprepared attendees.
- Is there a way for attendees to bring up something that’s not on the agenda? We include an “items not on the agenda” placeholder on our agendas to ensure that every elder has an opportunity to bring items before the elders. Unscrupulous leaders can use their agenda preparation responsibility to muzzle opposition or dissenting opinions.

I find it amusing, in an odd way, when church leaders complain about their meetings. Oftentimes, after they have vented, I suggest to them that our meetings don’t have to be so bad. After all, it’s our meeting! We allow them to be bad, or we cause them to be

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good. We can organize our time and meetings as we deem best so they can be efficient, effective and, yes, fun. Fun? At the conclusion of each of our elder meetings, one of our elders has the ministry of sharing a corny joke. We laugh together. And we go home with a smile on our faces.

More on improving our meetings next time.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
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