

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Improving Our Meetings – Working Better Together

*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/>.

Last month's article encouraged us to talk about how to better prepare for our leadership team meetings, primarily by means of an effective agenda process. This month, let's talk about what happens during our meetings.

Many of us have heard of Parkinson's Law: "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." Few of us, however, are aware of one of C. Northcote Parkinson's other "laws." It is the Law of Triviality, and it goes like this:

"The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum involved."<sup>1</sup>

For sake of illustration, Parkinson tells a fictitious tale about a finance committee that approves in minutes \$10 million for a reactor they know nothing about and feel stupid pretending to knowlegably discuss, and then spend an hour or more arguing about approving a \$2500 bicycle shed and \$57 for coffee to show their fiscal oversight commitment and skills to their constituents.

While I have never served on a church board that dealt with reactors, I have to admit that Parkinson's tale reminded me of some meetings that I have attended. I'll bet you've been to some meetings like that, too.

Why is it that we so often find when we meet together that we spend the largest amounts of time working on things that are not very important and seldom have enough time to fully address the really important and big decisions facing our congregations? Why do we so often feel rushed in making important decisions? Unless we are intentional and

actually do something different, we will be doomed to doing things as we currently do them. Figuring out whether or not we are doing the right things and having enough focus on the truly important things during our meetings is something to talk about.

Here are some thoughts that may spark some conversations.

- Have you ever voted on an issue that you didn't fully understand? Was there pressure to decide anyway? Is the team a safe place to share that you don't really understand an issue? How could you have gotten the information you needed to understand?
- What *should* we do during the times we meet together? Why should we be doing those things? Are we doing them? If not, why not?
- Does our board/team find ourselves spending lots of our time together dealing with relatively minor decisions or expenses at the expense of weightier issues such as caring for the congregation, prayer, study of scripture or current issues, mission, vision, core values, key strategies, and others?
- Are we meeting frequently enough to handle our work? Board members and work teams seldom like to meet more often, but let me suggest that if the content of those meetings is actually important, and the meetings are well-run, the pain of attending more often is likely offset by the satisfaction of doing good work together. We often somewhat arbitrarily schedule meetings once or twice a month rather than based upon the actual flow of work to be addressed. We become calendar-centric rather than work-centric. That's why we virtually never hear of a board/team that meets every three or five weeks.

In his book *Sticky Teams*, Larry Osborne writes about how the team at North Coast Church addressed this issue by deciding to have an additional meeting so that one meeting focuses upon work and voting and the other meeting focuses upon team building, training, and prayer.<sup>2</sup> Might this be a way to help your team give more focus to the truly important issues?

- Are we meeting on the right day and at the right time? For at least 40 years my church's board met on Thursday evening, generally from 7-10, but often longer. About 8 years ago, we asked ourselves if Thursday night was actually the best time for us to meet. Surprisingly, we decided to meet on Sunday afternoons immediately after the last service. We were all there, and we found that we really liked having our Thursday nights at home. We were more refreshed on Sunday afternoons than on a weekday evening after a full day at work, too. When did we last ask if we were meeting at the right time?
- Multiple studies have shown that people don't make good decisions when they are tired (just Google it...). Most church leadership teams have their board meetings in the evening of a workday. Oftentimes the church's leaders arrive tired and worn out after a long day at work. Is it any wonder that we sometimes have difficulty having the stamina required to effectively work through conflict and to arrive at good decisions? Is there another time when your team could meet where the members

would be more refreshed? How late into the night will you allow your meetings to go? I often suggest that no good decision occurs after 9:30 pm.

- Do we take the time to ensure that everyone speaks concerning an issue, or do we assume that silence is agreement? How can we get everyone to participate and buy in to a decision? At the church where I serve, we go around the room and require every elder to speak to their support or concern about every significant issue we discuss, requiring them to tell us why they support it or have concerns. This has proven to be very beneficial many times and has caused us to listen to our quieter voices. What do you do?
- I like to suggest to leadership teams that the most important thing that decision-making groups do is to discuss the issue – not to decide the issue – as the best possible decision under the circumstances comes not from voting but from the conversation that comes before. Do you agree or disagree?
- What can we do to reduce the time spent during meetings on routine topics so that more time can be spent on more important things?

Let me leave you with another observation by Mr. Parkinson.

“The (person) who is denied the opportunity of taking decisions of importance begins to regard as important the decisions he is allowed to take.”<sup>3</sup>

If we are not using our time together to make decisions on the truly important things, we will come to believe that the things we *are* engaged with *are* the important things. That’s how we come to argue about flower arrangements, room assignments, painting, and all kinds of other stuff that truly isn’t all that important. If we engage with the weightier issues of our ministry we will find that more trivial things are put where they belong – into the trivia bin. Remember – it’s our meeting! Let’s work to make them good, and we may actually begin to enjoy them.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob.osborne@efca.org](mailto:bob.osborne@efca.org).*

1. *Parkinson’s Law and Other Studies in Administration*, C. Northcote Parkinson (1957)
2. *Sticky Teams*, Larry Osborne (2010)
3. *Parkinson’s Law and Other Studies in Administration*