CHAPTER 9

CONDUCTING HIGH-IMPACT MEETINGS

Robert W. Strauss

Every meeting generates a host of little follow-up meetings—some formal, some informal, but both stretching out for hours. Meetings, therefore, need to be purposefully directed. An undirected meeting is not just a nuisance; it is a danger. But above all, meetings have to be the exception rather than the rule. An organization in which everybody meets all the time is an organization in which no one gets anything done. Wherever a time log shows the fatty degeneration of meetings—whenever, for instance, people in an organization find themselves in meetings a quarter of their time or more—there is time-wasting malorganization.

—Peter Drucker[1]

When professionals achieve greater success in organizations, they tend to spend more time in meetings, considering strategic options, developing plans, solving problems, and sharing critical information. Some managers spend more than 50% of their average work week in meetings, in addition to the time spent preparing for and performing tasks assigned in a meeting.[2-4] An endless stream of meetings can leave little time for other work.

Hofstra University and Harrison Consulting Services determined that three-fourths of business leaders spend more time in meetings now than they did a few years ago and expect to spend even more time in meetings in the future.[4] This time expenditure would be acceptable if meetings were valuable, yet people often state that meetings actually interfere with accomplishing their objectives. A poll of 471 management leaders conducted by Communispond reported that 70% of the participants found meetings "a waste of time," and a study of 38,000 Microsoft employees determined that 70% found meetings unproductive.[3,5] Accountemps determined that an average executive spends 2 months each year in unnecessary meetings.[6]

WHY MEETINGS FAIL

Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything.

—John Kenneth Galbraith, economist (1908-2006)

Meetings usually fail for one or more reasons[7-10]:

Poor leadership: The chair is disorganized, does not establish order or exert the discipline necessary to control input. Meeting leaders may be overly talkative, perhaps insisting on their own point of view; conversely, they may be too reserved to provide meaningful input. These chairs may not establish or follow an agenda and have little regard for the time or input of the participants, blocking effective communication.

***Poor participation*:** The participating members are disinterested (information is not relevant to them), routinely unprepared or late (are not held accountable), or participating in other endeavors (side conversations, catching up on other responsibilities, or texting) during the meeting.

***Poor time management*:** Meetings that neither begin nor end on time are discouraging to participants who are unable to rely on an efficient process. Consider those participants who show up on time only to find that the meeting begins late or the leader has not yet shown up. Even more frustrating are meetings that go beyond the predefined ending time, interfering with other appointments.

***Poor organization*:** These meetings lack a clear purpose or agenda, and they may begin late or run overtime. The members may speak anytime without being recognized, and there is one digression after another. Emotional responses may be directed at another person. The room is too hot, and members cannot see visual aids.

Poor meetings waste time that could have been devoted to more valuable efforts. So why have meetings? Because effective, well-organized, and well-led meetings are a center of creative and effective communication. To be effective, meetings require thoughtful preparation, sensitive and purposeful leadership, and a strong focus on meeting the group's objectives.

THE VALUE OF MEETINGS

Reasons to Avoid a Meeting

First, determine whether the meeting is necessary (**Box 9.1**).[11] Meetings that occur out of habit (e.g., "because we always meet") should be reconsidered and possibly eliminated. If the organizer cannot develop a meaningful agenda, then find an alternative method for accomplishing the goal. Unfortunately, some ritualistic meetings, like Linus's blanket, are not easily abandoned. An example might be meetings held at the same time each month about the same topics.

If there are no decisions to be made or you are unsure what will be accomplished, skip the meeting. A meeting is unnecessary when there is no important information to share, no question to be asked, no problem to be solved, or the answer is already known and the leader does not need permission or buy-in to accomplish the goal. Avoid meetings when greater involvement will only confuse the issue.

Reasons to Have a Meeting

Most meetings have one of two purposes: information transmission or problem-solving. Meetings may be an efficient way to communicate to a large group or the most effective way to make certain decisions (**Box 9.2**).[12,13]

***Information transmission*:** This type of meeting provides a forum for the simultaneous dissemination of information and creates a pool of consistent knowledge. Typical examples include defining and promoting a group's mission, educational seminars, training sessions, project reports, and program updates.

BOX 9.1 ■ REASONS TO AVOID A MEETING

- No decisions to be made
- No meaningful information to share
- Information easily shared by memo, newsletter, or e-mail

BOX 9.2 ■ REASONS TO HAVE A MEETING

Can you answer YES to all these questions?

1. Do I know what problem I want to solve?
2. Do I need help or input?
3. Does help or input require simultaneous involvement of others?
4. Must the meeting be in person?

If the presentation is long or the group is large, audiovisual aids can enhance engagement and interest by helping the participants focus on the major points. During or after this type of presentation, the speaker should check for understanding and reactions and provide any necessary clarifications.

***Problem-solving*:** Problem-solving meetings are generally held to identify and address issues, develop solutions, make determinations, and identify implementation steps (**Box 9.3**). The premise of a problem-solving meeting is that that an issue exists that the members of the group have an interest in and can help solve. A group is generally more creative and better at decision-making than an equivalent number of individuals working alone.[3]

An additional advantage of group decision-making is that participation creates awareness of and commitment to the solution, which results in more effective and complete implementation. Jim Whitehurst, CEO of Red Hat, states that if those affected are involved from the start, change occurs more easily.[14] If the problem is solvable by a single person and commitment to the decision is unnecessary, a problem-solving meeting may be unnecessary.

Hospital staff and administration carry out their business by committee. Emergency department (ED) team members are uniquely positioned to be valuable contributors to these meetings because they interact with the entire medical staff, every inpatient unit, all hospital-based programs, thousands of community members, and large portions of the community's support and service programs.

By working toward the common good of the institution, ED clinicians can be instrumental in designing and implementing the institution's programs. The ED team can have a meaningful voice and presence that foster their recognition as peers and leaders. Over time, active participation will provide a broader perspective on the ED and its issues, so members of the ED should have representation on all key committees (**Table 9.1**).[15,16]

Telemeetings: the Alternative to In-Person Meetings

Virtual or online meetings are an excellent alternative to in-person meetings, particularly when necessary members are not near the hospital. The requirements are minimal: a computer, an Internet connection, and conferencing software. There are both advantages and disadvantages to choosing telemeetings over in-person meetings as well as rules and protocols to make telemeetings effective.

BOX 9.3 ■ VALUE OF PROBLEM-SOLVING MEETINGS

- Identify issues.
- Analyze situations.
- Clarify goals.
- Develop solutions.

TABLE 9.1 ■ Critical ED Committees

Committee	MD	RN	Advantage of active membership
Executive	✓		• Ensures ED's perspective is represented • Allows venue for discussion of ED strategic initiatives • Permits simultaneous dialogue with most medical staff and administrative leaders • Limits or prevents backstabbing complaints about the ED
Disaster	✓	✓	• Uses ED practitioners' unique knowledge of and expertise in EMS, triage, resource use, emergency intervention, communications, etc • Creates hospital and community leadership opportunity • Ensures best use of ED resources in a disaster
Credentials	✓		• Ensures ED's perspective is represented • Promotes fair evaluation of emergency physician candidates • Permits deep insight into medical staff members' interests and issues • (May) advance ED interests related to medical staff responsibilities
ED steering or governance	✓	✓	• Advances shared ED governance, responsibility, and accountability • Broadens representation • Creates a forum for consensus development, strategic planning, and team building
Performance improvement	✓	✓	• Reviews and provides perspective on high-visibility cases • Integrates ED quality programs in hospital-wide programs • Develops performance improvement strategies
Safety	✓	✓	• Aligns and integrates hospital safety standards • Analyzes hospital and ED safety issues • Develops plans to refine hospital and ED safety plans • Interacts with hospital leaders and board members

Advantages

- ***Ease of attendance***: The most common reasons for scheduling online meetings are increasing attendance, improving productivity, and decreasing the time, burden, and expense of travel. Participants attend by simply turning on a computer and connecting to the meeting. When a member is hundreds of miles away, participation might only be possible online.
- ***Informal***: Members can participate in a relaxed setting without the need to dress in formal attire.
- ***Fewer documents***: Digital attachments significantly reduce the number of paper documents typically provided to support onsite presentations.

Disadvantages

- ***Distractions***: Because their inattention may not be noticed, online members may be tempted to multitask, especially when the topic is of limited interest to the participant. Loss of focus limits the potential of the discussion.
- ***Personal connection***: Because so much communication and interpersonal feedback is related to body language, a presenter will not have the ability to observe and respond to the reception of the distant members, particularly with voice-only participation.

- ***Sensitive discussions***: Meetings intended to address difficult issues or those requiring particularly nuanced decisions are best managed in person.
- ***Technical issues***: There are several technical problems that can delay or disrupt an online meeting. Generally, all participants must have the same conference software loaded and running. The push of a (wrong) button might disconnect everyone. Inadequate Internet connections hamper communication.

Of note, video conferencing addresses many of the disadvantages of voice-only meetings. Video conferencing participation is enhanced when the entire group (not just the person speaking) is visible. With generally available software, presentation materials can be reviewed in real time, participants can see each other's reactions, and attention is substantially improved.

Telemeeting Rules

Participation protocols for telemeetings can and should be discussed and agreed on in advance. Ground rules are particularly valuable when there is no access to video, and it is difficult to know who is present, when to speak, or the reactions of others to the discussion. Some basic considerations include the following[17]:

- ***Announce your arrival.*** If late, do not interrupt, but rather wait for a pause in the discussion.
- ***Limit background noise.*** Keep your phone on mute when not speaking. Ensure there is no musical or promotional background when on hold.
- ***Know the agenda.*** Familiarize yourself with the meeting schedule and materials ahead of time.
- ***When speaking, introduce yourself each time.*** "This is Rob, I'd like to consider . . ." Be brief, be courteous, and avoid interrupting.

MEETING PREPARATION

Good meetings are well-orchestrated events. The first critical element of successful meetings is *planning;* organizing the meeting in advance allows the group to most efficiently accomplish its objectives (**Box 9.4**).[18] Preparing for a meeting includes developing objectives, creating an agenda, inviting the appropriate people, and preparing the room logistics. Less time is spent in meetings when more time is spent preparing for them.

Determine the Purpose

All too often, meetings seem to exist without purpose. A poorly clarified set of goals and objectives for the meeting confuses participants and wastes their time. When preparing for a

BOX 9.4 ■ MEETING PREPARATION

- Determine the purpose.
- Develop an agenda.
- Select participants.
- Set the scene.
- Seat for success.

meeting, leaders should determine its intended purpose in order to share its importance and specific goals. Thoughtful preparation and distribution of clearly stated objectives improves the likelihood of accomplishing them. If several objectives are listed on the agenda, they should be prioritized to ensure that the most important issues receive appropriate attention. Once the objectives are clear, the meeting leaders should create a plan to accomplish those objectives and to figuratively "write the minutes before the meeting."

Effective leaders do not necessarily define the outcome of the meeting, but they *do* determine how to achieve to an outcome. In other words, they create an essential agenda that addresses several critical questions:

- What will be discussed?
- Who needs to be present?
- How long will it take?
- What outcomes address the meeting's purpose?

Develop an Agenda

The agenda is the most important document required for a successful meeting.[3,7] An agenda is a road map, timetable, overview, advertisement, and goal-setter (**Box 9.5**). It cues the presiding officer, enlists the attention of members, and keeps participants moving in the same direction at the same time. More time spent preparing an agenda will mean less time in the meeting. The agenda should be complete but accomplishable. If the time runs out before the meeting does, participants will be left with the impression of disorganization and poor prioritization. The agenda should be circulated in advance to allow members to plan for their participation.

State goals and objectives. The statement at the beginning of the agenda communicates the chair's overall vision for the meeting.

List discussion topics. Participants prefer to know in advance what will happen and what is expected of them. An agenda that is divided into its component parts will help organize and focus the discussion, allowing the chair to redirect a wandering group. It may be helpful to mark items for information, discussion, or decision-making to cue members to expectations. When developing the agenda, leadership consultant Roger Schwarz recommends seeking input from the participants on specific agenda items that are of particular interest to them.[19]

Sequence topics. Provide an orderly framework for the meeting's topics by placing them in a logical sequence. When discussion flows from one topic to another, it becomes easier to develop support for the issue and the meeting is more manageable. A well-organized approach will facilitate work on key concepts. Some leaders suggest beginning with topics that require creativity, which allows adequate time to be spent on the most complex issues. Others recommend an orderly progression of topics beginning with easier, less taxing topics, and proceeding to more difficult and complex issues.

BOX 9.5 ■ MEETING AGENDA ITEMS

1. Title of meeting
2. Date, start and end times
3. Location
4. List of invited individuals
5. Meeting goals and objectives
6. List of topics:
   a. Use action verbs to describe the objective.
   b. Provide a brief summary (optional).
7. Supporting documents

Distribute in advance. Circulating the agenda in advance enables members to come to the meeting prepared. This practice also allows the group members to confirm the time of the meeting and review the topics for discussion. The chair must consider each topic and come prepared. Advance circulation eliminates the most common cause of confusion at the beginning of a meeting, the question of what is being discussed, and shows consideration for participants.

Provide supporting documents. Supporting documents should be attached and sent in advance with the agenda, so that members may become familiar with the information before the meeting, unless the documents contain confidential information that must be protected.

List action items. Most agenda items require specific action by members of the group.[20,21] The group members will accomplish more when the agenda specifically defines what is to be done with a topic. When creating an agenda, it may be helpful to review *Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs*, including the following examples[22]:

- Review the available options to . . .
- Determine the best approach to . . .
- Establish guidelines for . . .
- Develop education program for . . .
- Identify potential contributors to . . .

Select Appropriate Participants

The planner must decide who should attend the meeting, avoiding these common but irrelevant reasons[23,24]:

- ***"They've always been at the meeting" (a ritual).*** Inviting individuals who will not meaningfully contribute to the discussion is a waste of time and can disrupt the meeting.
- ***"Let's get agreeable members for quick and easy decisions" (a rubber stamp).*** Homogeneity (choosing those with a similar perspective) leads to quick decisions that have worked in the past. Few alternatives or creative options will be considered, and leadership challenges will be rare. A homogeneous group falls prey to "groupthink" and tends to exhibit stereotypic behavior and superficial decisions.[25]
- ***"Let's include everyone" (a public relations event).*** Large groups (more than 12-15) tend to be ineffective at decision-making.

Relevant considerations for membership include the following[23,26]:

- ***Topic expertise***: the knowledge and potential to contribute
- ***Authority***: the power to make a decision
- ***Responsibility***: the ability to implement a decision
- ***Stakeholder or end user***: those directly affected by the decision

A diverse group produces the most innovative thinking because they bring more information, alternatives, opinions, and creativity. Decisions made by a diverse group will occur more slowly, but these decisions are generally more nuanced, complex, and lasting. The group will be less complacent and will drive for innovative solutions.

Set the Scene

Although the perfect meeting environment will not guarantee a success, an uncomfortable room that is hot, stuffy, noisy, or overly dark will certainly increase the likelihood of failure. When planning the room setting, consider the following physical characteristics:

***Room size*:** Choose a room that corresponds to the group's size. A small group in a very large room will create distance between individuals that hinders communication, undermining attention, and group cohesiveness.[2,13,23] A small room may quickly get hot, stuffy, and oppressive, squelching meaningful discussion. People seated too closely together may be uncomfortable and become agitated.

***Room aesthetics*:** Dissention is more likely to occur when people are crowded into an unattractive room for a prolonged period. Poor aesthetics can produce monotony, irritability, fatigue, and hostility. A red room quickly becomes unpleasant. Lighter shades of blue, green, or beige are the most relaxing and conducive to successful group communication and "relaxed concentration."[2,24]

***Environment*:** The environment is rarely considered by meeting attendees unless there is a problem. The room should be attractive, clean, well ventilated, and well lit and allow an unobstructed view of the presenters and audiovisuals. Acoustics should be adequate and the temperature comfortable. Refreshments may be appropriate because "breaking bread" creates a more cohesive group; the meeting should make everybody feel nourished.

***Seating arrangement to enhance success*:** Seating configuration should be specifically designed to accomplish the meeting's objective. A formal classroom or theater-style configuration limits interaction, which is ideal for an information transmission meeting such as a lecture or training seminar (**Figure 9.1**).[2,8,24]

FIGURE 9.1 ■ Formal Classroom (Theater) Seating

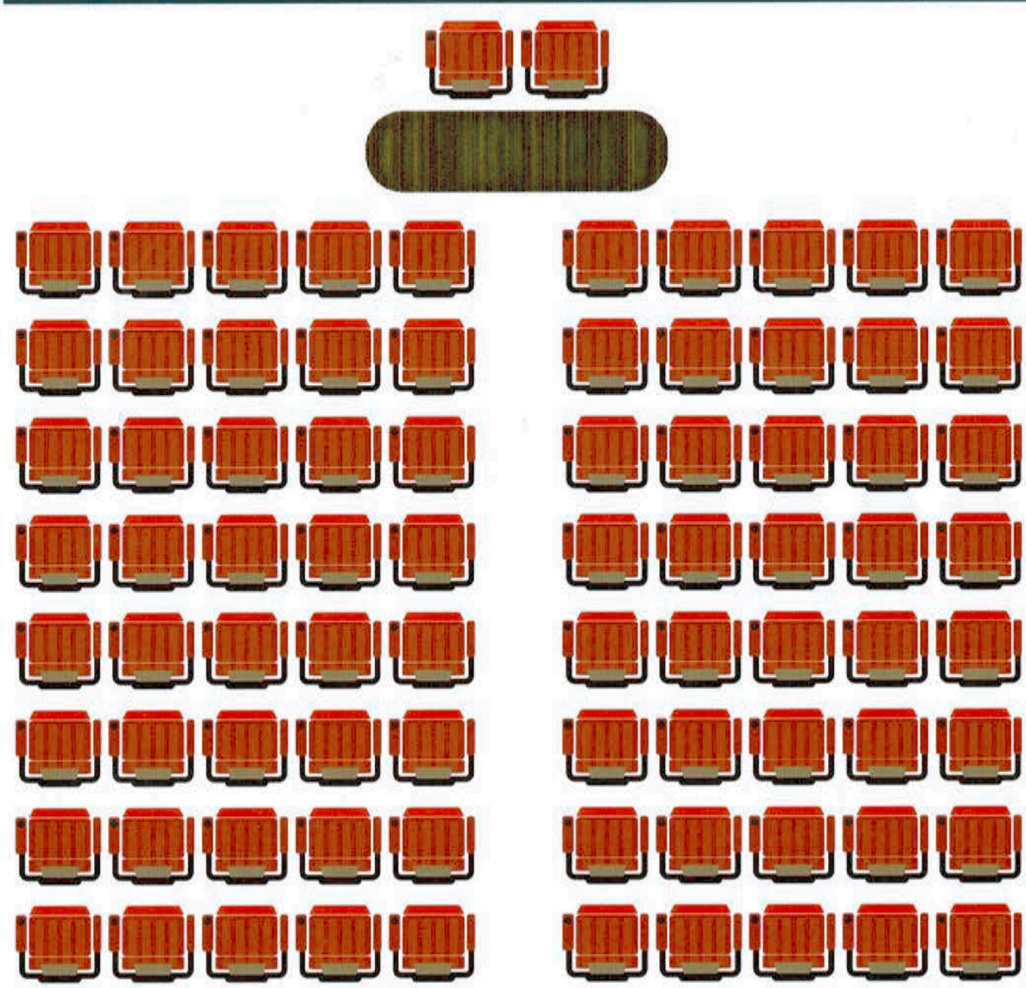
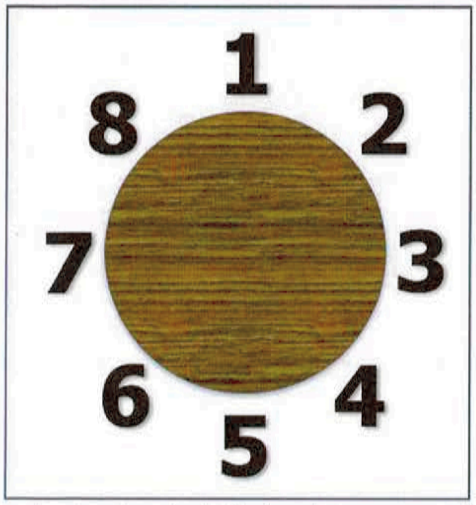


FIGURE 9.2 ■ Circular Seating



Circular seating limits the authority of any individual and encourages all members to participate.

A decentralized or circular arrangement (**Figure 9.2**) encourages the exchange of ideas and is more appropriate for a smaller group when the goal is problem-solving or decision-making. These configurations enhance group interaction and are particularly suitable for meetings addressing complex issues requiring careful deliberation.

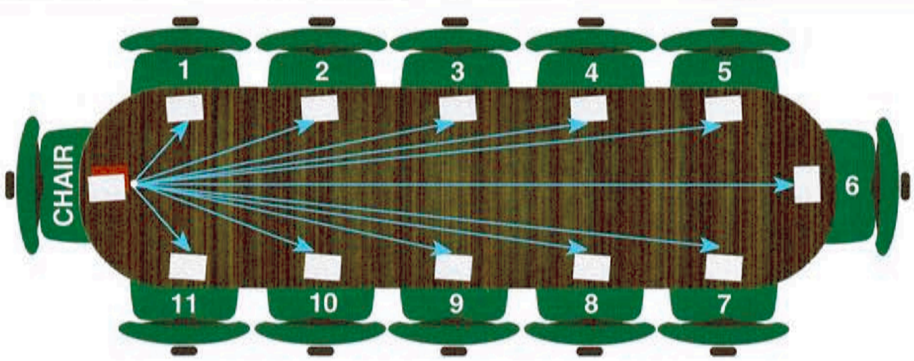
A circular arrangement maximizes interaction and participation but removes the leader from the position of power, which may lead to more disagreements. However, because satisfaction with decisions is generally based on participation, members will tend to be more satisfied with and confident about the solutions when they contribute. The solutions from an engaged group will tend to be more detailed and contain fewer errors.

Positions of Power and Weakness

The positions of the group members in a noncircular seating arrangement will significantly influence their participation and control of the meeting.

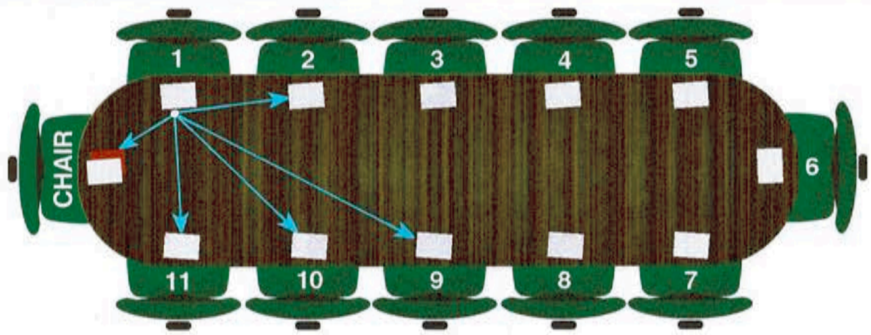
Positions of dominance: The head of the table is the most dominant position.[2,27] Leaders tend to sit at the head of the table; therefore, the people who sit at the head of the table tend to emerge as leaders (**Figure 9.3**). Attention is focused at the head of a table: it is easy to hear and be heard, to see and be seen.

FIGURE 9.3 ■ Dominant Seating Positions



Positions around the table significantly influence the participation of the members. leaders sitting at the head of the table simultaneously have visual access to and influence over all members.

FIGURE 9.4 ■ Nondominant Seating Positions



Corner sitters have the least visual access to and influence over most members, other than the chair.

***Positions of nondominance*:** Corner and middle seats are nondominant positions. Corner sitters tend to be the least active (**Figure 9.4**), but they can potentially influence the chair during a sidebar conversation. A leader who sits in a nondominant position may have to struggle for attention and control. Sitting in the middle of the long side of a table will limit visibility and communication, particularly with those facing the same direction. A chair who sits in the corner is in the weakest position with the least visual access to other participants.

***Strategic placement of group members*:** It may be possible to place members of the group to create the most favorable interaction.[2,21] Any manipulation of seating must occur before the meeting begins. Methods include setting place cards, inviting a member to sit next to you, or having allies invite someone to sit next to them. Specific placement strategies include the following:

- ***Distracters*:** Overly talkative members may be placed in a corner (i.e., positions 1, 5, 7, or 11) to minimize their interactions and influence.
- ***Shy members*:** Reticent group members may be placed at the other end (head) of the table (i.e., position 6). This placement encourages participation, and the withdrawn member may emerge as more of a leader.
- ***Squabblers and socializers*:** Argumentative and overly social members should be placed apart but facing the same direction (e.g., positions 1 and 5). This placement limits direct interaction and conflict by limiting proximity and visual confrontation.
- ***Opponents of the chair*:** A pontificator or powerful opponent should be encouraged to sit next to the chair (i.e., positions 1 or 11), separated from his or her support system. Given the choice, adversaries tend to sit across from each other and surround themselves with their supporters. This arrangement occurs frequently during a negotiation. Placing the pontificator next to the chair limits control of and access to others and gives the chair direct influence over the possibly disruptive member.
- ***Inner versus outer circle*:** A member who sits outside the inner circle will generally feel excluded; a member who sits in the inner circle will tend to participate more actively in the discussion. When attending lectures, many choose the front of the room because it encourages a sense of involvement and allows direct access to the speaker. Sitting in the back of a room discourages involvement and allows the attendee to focus attention on other issues.

RUNNING THE MEETING

A poorly run meeting is like a poorly run resuscitation: No one is in charge and everyone feels that things are out of control. Whether or not the desired outcome is achieved, everyone involved will believe the process could have been better.

Why are meetings so bad—why do they fall short? A study of business managers reveals that 78% have no formal training in running meetings; this percentage is much higher for health-care workers.[3,28] As much as half of a director's nonclinical time is spent attending, doing the work assigned from, or preparing for meetings led by people who have little or no formal training.

Setting the Tone

The conduct of the chair determines the extent to which the meeting will reach its potential. The leader must set the tone. The chair begins to establish credibility by arriving early and sitting at the head of the table. The posture, confidence, and enthusiasm of the leader influence the perceptions of the group members. If the chair is businesslike, committed, and task-oriented, the group members are more likely to meaningfully participate. If the chair is confused, lackadaisical, or unfocused, the result may be aimless discourse. If the chair tells too many jokes or grandstands, others will do the same.

Skillful guidance: Leadership is the ability to exert interpersonal influence. The chair should be like a stage director, bringing the issue and associated information onto the stage, directing and rallying the forces, channeling opinions and ideas into meaningful conclusions, and moving the issue offstage by thoughtfully and deliberately transitioning to the next issue.

Chair participation depends on the type of meeting. If the purpose of the meeting is to disseminate information and the chair is the person with the greatest expertise, the chair may take a substantial role in the discussion. However, if the meeting is intended to be a problem-solving meeting, the participation of the chair may be limited. During a problem-solving meeting, the chair may become more of a facilitator, encouraging the expression of all the opinions and generally refraining from advocating any particular viewpoint.

Chair's opinion: Generally, the chair's responsibility is to ascertain the group's resolve rather than to impose his or her own.[3] Achieving this goal requires effective listening and keen attention.

Rule: The role of the chair is not to accomplish his or her goals but to encourage the group or committee to recognize common goals and implement them. Accomplishing the group's goals (not the leader's) should be the focus.

A chair should avoid strongly advocating for his or her own opinion before carefully listening to the opinions of others. The "listen first" strategy allows other viewpoints to be heard and relevant concepts to be incorporated into the chair's view. A chair who strongly believes one solution is best loses objectivity and cannot effectively facilitate discussion.

On occasion, the chair may believe that a particular decision of great importance may have only one satisfactory solution. In this case, the issue should be resolved by premeeting "jawboning." This process entails the chair or others speaking individually with committee members in advance of the more public discussion. It may be wise to determine the answer to a controversial issue before, rather than during, the meeting. In fact, if committee members cannot be convinced of a particular solution before the meeting, the chair is unlikely to convince them in the meeting. In other words, the chair should solve difficult and disruptive issues before the meeting and take a stand on an issue only when the outcome is assured.

Beginning the Discussion

As stated earlier, poorly articulated agendas and goals create confusion. Effective leaders establish a clear direction and stick to it.

Describe a clear purpose. Effective leaders begin with a brief review of the agenda and start each topic with a concise presentation of the decision to be made (i.e., an orientation to the goals). This is the time to pronounce the importance of the discussion that will occur, its value to the people, organization, patients, community, and/or participants. The leader may describe the method to achieve the goal, with an impartial review of the alternatives. Describing and following an intended order of discussion will help members stay on track and discourage digression.

Create ground rules. Members of a new group will arrive with expectations based on their individual experience. Formulating expectations or ground rules during the formative phase of a group can help the team function most effectively.[23] The ground rules can be divided into process, decision-making, and after meeting. In the following section, types of ground rules are listed for consideration by the group.

Establishing Ground Rules

- *Agendas*:
  - ☐ Distributed at or before meeting
  - ☐ Followed in an orderly fashion during the meeting
  - ☐ When nonagenda items will be discussed (at the beginning or end of the meeting, or placed on a future agenda)
- *Attendance*: standards set by group
- *Promptness*:
  - ☐ Expectation of timeliness
  - ☐ Notification of late arrival or nonattendance
  - ☐ Begin and end on time
- *Participation*:
  - ☐ Are all members encouraged to speak?
  - ☐ Must members be recognized by the chair before speaking?
  - ☐ Limit sidebar conversations.
  - ☐ Limit back-and-forth conversations between two people.
- *Respect*:
  - ☐ One speaker at a time
  - ☐ Cell phone and texting rules
- *Roles*:
  - ☐ Taking notes
  - ☐ Facilitation
- *Conflict management*: for example, disagreement is acceptable, but personal attacks are unacceptable.

Decision-Making Ground Rules

- *Agreement*: Contrary views are encouraged; silence equates to agreement.
- *Chair's opinion*: As facilitator, the chair should remain neutral when possible.
- *Complex decision techniques*: Encourage brainstorming and use of the nominal group technique (see below).
- *Conclusion*: Move toward a conclusion, limit nonpertinent discussions, and request a vote or consensus.
- *Commitment to decision*: All should be in support of the group's decisions (e.g., 70% rule).

BOX 9.6 ■ MANAGING AIRTIME

- Allocate ample time.
- Limit the time spent on a topic.
- Sequence discussants.
- Limit two-way debates.
- Intermittently summarize the discussion.
- Avoid speaking too much.
- Resolve issues in advance.

After-Meeting Ground Rules

- *Next meeting*: Schedule the next meeting before the current one ends.
- *Task completion*: Review assignments before adjourning, and define member expectations.
- *Sharing materials*: Create and distribute the meeting minutes and assignments, and formulate a management action plan (see "Distribute the Minutes" below).

Managing Airtime

The chair should guide discussion to a meaningful conclusion. This responsibility often requires actively sequencing the speakers and determining when and for how long each person speaks. There are many methods to control the discussion on a topic (**Box 9.6**).

Allocate ample time. A well-conducted meeting starts and ends on time. The chair should stress promptness because late members distract on-time participants from the discussion. Further, topics or background information that have been presented and perhaps resolved may require time-wasting reexamination to bring the late arriving members up to speed.

Participants generally appreciate meetings that end early because they get unexpected time for other activities. Conversely, participants may become frustrated by meetings that end late and infringe on other priorities. Additionally, the chair who allows meetings to run over time will be viewed as disorganized at best and disrespectful at worst.

Limit time on the topic. Time limits set in advance help govern the discussion and discourage rambling. Within reason, the chair should adhere to those limits. If a topic requires more time than originally planned, the chair may seek group agreement to extend the time on the current topic by reducing time on another topic. Time limits for individual members may be necessary when there are many people eager to speak, the topic is controversial, or there are domineering members of the group.

Sequence discussants to provide order. It may be expedient for the chair to exercise control over who will speak next. It is frustrating to politely raise one's hand to be recognized, especially when others interrupt the discussion.

A chair may provide order by:

- asking members to raise a hand to be recognized,
- scanning the room to recognize when others wish to speak,
- acknowledging (perhaps with a head nod) that a speaker's turn will come in order,
- creating a list of speakers in the order they raised their hands,
- calling on speakers according to the list, or
- discouraging members from interrupting and talking out of turn.

To emphasize this procedure, the chair can intermittently state the sequence of speakers, which will let all members know that they will get a chance to speak. Members can then focus on the discussion rather than worry about working their way into it.

Limit back-and-forth dialogue. Back-and-forth debate frustrates other members of the group who may wish to have their opinions heard. The chair may simply state that others would like an opportunity to discuss the topic and describe the order of the next speakers. This process reminds the members that the chair will control the discussion.

Intermittently summarize the discussion. Summarizing the discussion helps all participants understand the status of an issue, and acknowledging the points of view may help difficult participants who believe that they are not being heard and continue to repeat the same position.

Avoid speaking too much. Some meeting leaders may be tempted to speak at length on every topic, believing that they know more and are responsible for driving the discussion. This approach may have a chilling effect on others and limit discussion by those who are uncomfortable venturing an opinion. In his book, *How to Run a Meeting Without Talking Too Much,* Art Markman suggests that meeting leaders[29]:

- determine in advance when they will speak,
- avoid speaking on every topic,
- prepare and then further condense remarks, and
- encourage input and let others know that their participation is anticipated.

Issues that do not require discussion in the meeting should be resolved in advance. Limit circulation of handouts during the meeting. Meeting attendees will complain if materials that could have been digested before the meeting are instead reviewed or, worse, read at the meeting because their time is being wasted. Alternatively, the chair can assign a member to summarize background materials or list possible solutions to a problem that does not require the group's deliberation in the meeting.

Facilitating the Discussion

Digression is the soul of wit. Take the philosophic asides away from Dante, Milton, or Hamlet's father's ghost and what stays is dry bones.

—Ray Douglas Bradbury, writer of fantasy and science fiction novels

Although digressions in artistic works may add context and flavor, in meetings they create confusion. Wandering discussion is a common problem in meetings; participants do not believe it is their responsibility to direct the discussion, and some leaders wish to avoid appearing overbearing. The result is a tortuous, and sometimes *torturous,* discussion. The chair should carefully monitor discussion and focus the group's attention on the issue. Periodically, the chair can refocus the discussion by summarizing its main points and reflecting on its relationship to the agenda item. Effective chairs continually ask themselves the following questions:

- What is being discussed now?
- Is it relevant?
- Will this discussion move us toward resolution?
- If not, how can I refocus the discussion without stepping on the speaker?

The chair is a type of gatekeeper, encouraging pertinent discussion and curbing unnecessary input. Groups require and appreciate guidance to an end—a decision. When the discussion is poorly focused, the chair must adhere to an orderly process to clarify the discussion and concentrate on the issue at hand. When ideas are widely scattered and disjointed, it may be helpful to use specific problem-solving steps (see "Problem-Solving Techniques").

Digressions occur for several reasons, including disinterest in the current discussion, a "hot-button" issue that has been triggered, or the group leader's loss of focus. Managing off-topic discussions requires a balance of discipline and sensitivity. Once recognized, a digression may be dealt with by one of these methods:

***On topic, out of order (i.e., subsequent agenda items)*:** Issues that are slated for later discussion may be noted with a commitment to address the issue later, "Yes, this is an important topic that we will address in a few minutes when we get to . . . Now I'd like to focus on . . . ." If the issue needs to be addressed out of order, the leaders should note the change in agenda order and commit to come back to the slated item.

***Off-topic (unrelated) items*:** Off-topic discussions, although important, may not be part of the meeting's purpose. If the item does not need to be dealt with immediately, then the new issue should be recognized as important but not for the day's agenda. The chair may additionally agree to address the topic at the end of the meeting, if time permits; discuss it privately after the meeting; or save the matter for a subsequent agenda.

Closing the Discussion

Seasoned leaders effectively close discussion. Conversely, inexperienced chairs may allow a discussion to continue beyond its useful time to avoid being perceived as heavy-handed. The chair is responsible for determining when the discussion has gone on long enough, such as when no new concepts are being presented or when the group appears to have reached consensus. Common closure misconceptions include the following:

- ***Everybody must speak.*** The discussion must go on until everybody has said as much as he or she wants to on the topic. Although group input is critical to resolving issues, it is unnecessary for each and every member to participate without limits.
- ***Everyone must agree.*** Although it is preferable that the group comes to consensus, it may not be possible. When the chair recognizes that the sentiments of the individual members are established, it may be the time to conclude the discussion. The chair should then summarize the information and ask for consensus or a vote. Decisions made by consensus are preferable to those made by vote because it encourages the support of members who may be responsible for implementation.
- ***We must decide all the details now.*** Determining the fine points may unnecessarily prolong a meeting. Instead, an individual or subcommittee may be assigned to develop the implementation process.

When a stated goal of the agenda has been met, it is helpful to conclude the segment with a summary of any decisions, assignments, and implementation plans that have been made—and then move on.

PROBLEM-SOLVING TECHNIQUES

When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

—Yogi Berra, MLB Hall of Famer and three-time MVP

Group decisions have several advantages over decisions made by an individual. Groups working together to resolve important issues are generally more satisfied with the

BOX 9.7 ■ GROUP PROBLEM-SOLVING METHODS

- Identify the problem.
- Describe the facts.
- Determine alternative solutions.
- Choose the best solution.
- Determine an implementation method.

outcome, have a greater sense of unity, create more nuanced decisions, and develop greater commitment to the decision. Various problem-solving methods incorporate the advantages of group participation in the decision-making process. Most problem-solving techniques involve an orderly sequence of steps (**Box 9.7**).

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a simple, effective, easy-to-use method of problem-solving that has broad application.[30] Brainstorming is valuable because it encourages group creativity and reduces personal bias. The five steps of brainstorming are:

- ***State the problem.*** The specific issue or problem to be resolved is presented, and ideally the group commits to solving the problem. The leader describes the technique, time limit, and ground rules.
- ***Generate solutions.*** Ideas, suggestions, and recommendations from the participants are called for. During this stage, judgment should be suspended to allow members to suggest imaginative ideas without the fear of criticism or ridicule. The chair may state that "there are no bad ideas" to encourage participation. Another way to think about this is that innovative and nontraditional ideas should be encouraged because the current approach has not worked, and a nonthreatening environment engenders the greatest creativity. Alex Faickney Osborn, an advertising executive who popularized the term "brainstorming," suggested that "quantity breeds quality."[30] In other words, the more ideas that are considered, the greater the likelihood of finding an effective solution. All ideas should be listed on a visible medium such as a whiteboard to allow structured exploration.
- ***Develop criteria.*** This step provides a bridge between generation and selection of solutions. The group examines individual and group values and agrees on the standards against which the solutions will be judged. This step may be difficult and require thorough examination. The criteria should be listed near the possible solutions. Once the group agrees on acceptable criteria, selecting a solution is simplified.
- ***Compare solutions to criteria.*** Each option is discussed in relation to the developed criteria, and solutions that do not meet the most important criteria should be eliminated or receive a low ranking. Over time, consensus begins to emerge.
- ***Reach consensus.*** When the group has reached consensus, the facilitator should review the group's decision, test understanding and agreement, ask for commitment, and develop the implementation steps.

Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique is another popular method of quickly solving complex and controversial issues.[31] This technique ensures the involvement of each participant and maintains confidentiality in decision-making. Once the group is gathered, the facilitator poses the question and leads the members through the following six steps:

- *Develop individual answers.* Each member of the group develops solutions to the problem.
- *Compile group's solutions.* The facilitator asks each individual to contribute one idea at a time with a brief explanation. Each suggestion is recorded on a visible medium such as a flip chart or video screen. This process continues until all ideas are presented.
- *Clarify each idea.* Each idea is reviewed with details described. The facilitator and members of the group ask for explanations and clarifications. Similar or duplicative ideas are combined.
- *Take preliminary vote.* Each person individually prioritizes and ranks the listed solutions. An anonymous vote is taken to determine which alternatives the group considers the best.
- *Discuss differences of opinion.* The initial ranking compiled by the group vote is discussed. Major differences are examined to ensure each member clearly understands the information.
- *Select preferred solution.* After the discussion is completed, members again prioritize their solutions. A final anonymous vote is taken, and a solution is chosen.

NAVIGATING IMPASSES

Problem-solving meetings depend simultaneously on controlled flow of the discussion by the leader and active participation of the members. However, some members may be too active, dominating the discussion, whereas others may be reticent to participate. Although leaders are responsible for facilitating the discussion, they are not totally responsible for the success of the meeting.

Successful leaders have highly evolved interpersonal skills: they can balance the human desire to participate with the need to control direction and input. Judgment should be withheld to avoid stifling participation and creativity. Simultaneously, the leader must limit and guide the discussion to move it to conclusion.

Dealing With Difficult People and Emotions

A lively meeting discussion with important consequences can rouse participants' emotions and bring out participants' individual personality traits. Good leaders are able to validate the concerns and emotions of the participants while continuing to refocus on the issues.

Emotional responses: Great meetings accomplish results of importance to those involved. The significance of these issues naturally evokes strong feelings from the participants. Some group leaders may discourage the expression of feeling because they fear the exposure of too much emotion. They may be concerned that emotional expressions will damage relationships and distract from the problem-solving process, or they may believe that a meeting is successful only if everybody is affable, preferring positive "public relations" to meaningful decision-making.

Emotional responses to issues should be accepted rather than avoided. In fact, the chair would be well advised to express gratitude for the display of concern about such an important issue. However, personalized (ad hominem) attacks toward an individual should not be tolerated. The leader should immediately restore order, perhaps saying, "This is not the forum for this type of discussion. We will remain objectively focused on the issue." The chair could use this awkward moment as an opportunity to refocus the discussion by providing an objective summary of the issue and the decisions yet to be made.

***Dominator*:** The dominator tends to monopolize the discussion and exclude other participants.[32] There are several types of dominators: talkative people, self-appointed experts, and angry members with an ax to grind. Their common characteristic is a desire to talk without listening; many want to run the meeting. The person who does the most talking usually feels as though the most was accomplished.

The chair should not allow a single member to inhibit group creativity. Doing nothing in response to a dominator may allow the meeting to spiral out of control. Conversely, a head-to-head confrontation may create an intolerable, although entertaining, conflict. At best, the meeting becomes a spectacle; at worst, the chair will lose. In either case, many good ideas may be stifled, and everyone present will be uncomfortable. Dominators can be valuable participants, however, and should not be totally silenced. There are many more subtle and successful methods for dealing with the dominator:

- ***Arrange seating.*** Chairs may (just prior to the beginning of the meeting) ask a dominator to sit next to them in the less powerful corner position. Placing the dominator next to the chair allows the chair to influence the dominator, and the corner position decreases the visibility and influence of the dominator on the rest of the group.
- ***Limit discussion in advance.*** Impose structure by setting ground rules with the group. For example, "In order to ensure that everyone has input into this important discussion, we'll limit each person to 2 to 3 minutes and allow everyone who wishes to speak to do so before a second round of comments."
- ***Control the discussion.*** Considering the comments of the early speakers, the chair may then carefully direct the discussion toward reticent participants by asking what they think.
- ***Avoid dialogues.*** The leader should take responsibility for recognizing each speaker prior to speaking and ensure that the dominator does not control the discussion.

Body language may also be successful when managing the dominator. Looking at the dominator, holding up the index finger, or even an open palm out to signal "stop" will usually quiet the speaker. Standing will draw attention directly to the chair and away from the dominator. If it is still difficult to control the dominator, take a brief recess and use the time to talk directly to the dominator. Explain the value of the group process and of allowing other, quieter participants to speak.

***Silent members*:** Even in meetings with significant group participation, one or more members may not be actively engaged in the discussion. This may occur because the members are shy or feel inhibited by more dominant members. To gain the greatest value from the group process, the leader should sensitively recognize the reticent members and encourage their input.

Avoid calling attention to silence as a means of changing it or making a joke at the expense of a quieter member. Although perhaps well meaning, these techniques will further discourage participation and potentially create enmity. To encourage silent members, seat them in a power position such as the end of the table. Bring the reticent member forward by asking a simple, direct question such as, "John, have you had experience with this situation?" Allow the quiet member early and easy success by responding supportively and integrating his or her reply into the discussion.

Handling Difficult Situations

In moderation, emotion, disagreement, and conflict may result in the most creative, well-thought-out decisions. However, when tempers rise and anger threatens to derail the meeting, the chair must take decisive action without becoming embroiled in the conflict. The only thing worse than watching meetings deteriorate is participating in the destruction. The worst response is anger. It may relieve the tension of the chair, but it will add to everyone else's.

Focus on interests. Frequently, the disagreeing members will have adopted different positions on the same issue. To defend their position, the members may become contentious. This situation can usually be resolved simply by refocusing the discussion on the interests of the parties.[33]

Intervene with process checks. When the discussion wanders or the meeting falls off track, the chair may use several methods to bring the meeting back into focus:

- Ask a particularly rational member, "How do you think we should address this?" This technique will usually direct the group's attention to the new speaker and allow the chair the opportunity to regain focus and control.
- Make a general statement such as, "We are clearly off track and moving in different directions. Does anybody have an idea of how to get back on track?" This question usually works because the members concentrate their attention toward reestablishing an orderly discussion.
- Suggest taking a break. During the recess, the chair has an opportunity to gain composure, establish control over dominators, discuss methods of moving forward, and enlist support from group members.

CLOSING THE MEETING

Ending the meeting well is as important as beginning it and running it (**Box 9.8**). The meeting should end when the anticipated decisions are made, there is no new information, or a subcommittee can better deal with the remaining issues.

End on time. Leaders should make every effort to end meetings on time. Participants perceive leaders as disrespectful when they allow meetings to run longer than scheduled. Conversely, meetings that end early are particularly pleasing to the participants. If there are a few minutes left, it may be helpful to offer the participants an opportunity to briefly voice critical issues that were unaddressed during the meeting. Few will speak, but for those who do, this opportunity may make the difference between leaving the meeting satisfied or frustrated. Rarely, an issue of significance may be raised and cannot be resolved in the remaining time. These issues can usually be addressed after adjournment or at the next meeting.

Summarize accomplishments. The chair may wish to allot specific time on the agenda to summarize the meeting's accomplishments and to review important decisions in

BOX 9.8 ■ CHECKLIST FOR CLOSING A MEETING

- End on time.
- Summarize accomplishments.
- Assign or clarify tasks.
- Schedule the next meeting.
- Assess the meeting.
- Distribute the meeting minutes (after).

relation to the meeting's intended goals. Praising the group will help end the meeting on a positive note.

Clarify responsibilities and deadlines. It is appropriate during the closing for the chair to clarify what is to be done, by whom, and by when. This review ensures that participants understand, acknowledge, and commit to their responsibilities between meetings. Each participant should leave with a clear understanding of his or her obligations. Some enthusiastic participants may accept unrealistic deadlines because they are focused on the goal of the moment without considering their other commitments. As such, the chair should rein in unrealistic deadlines and set more credible time frames for task completion.

Schedule the next meeting. If a follow-up meeting (not already scheduled) is necessary, it may be appropriate to schedule it before adjourning. Defining the best time may be easier when many or all the essential members are already in the room. This strategy will assist members to develop a commitment to the deadlines. However, when specific deadlines cannot be determined in advance, then a general time frame and a mechanism for contacting members should be established.

Assess the meeting. Although meeting leaders often believe that their meetings were successful, others may not agree. A meeting's success should be determined by asking its participants, either directly at the end of the meeting or perhaps with an anonymous questionnaire sent after. Many evaluation tools are accessible online. Generally, all assessments attempt to answer four questions[34]:

1. *Effectiveness*: Were the meeting goals clear, and did the meeting accomplish those goals?
2. *Time and organization*: Were the planning and execution (logistics) effective?
3. *Leadership*: Did the group and leader ensure appropriate tone and participation?
4. *Next steps*: Did the participants clearly understand follow-up actions and specific responsibilities?

Distribute the minutes. Minutes are created to record what has occurred and to remind participants of what needs to be done; they should be quickly distributed after the conclusion of the meeting. The chair is responsible for creating minutes that accurately reflect the essential elements of the meeting. Simple management action plan templates are useful for documenting most meetings (**Table 9.2**), but more sophisticated and detailed project management tools may be necessary for long-term processes involving multiple stakeholders (**Table 9.3**). The minutes should detail the agreed-upon actions, deadlines, and individuals

TABLE 9.2 ■ Simple Management Action Plan

Topic	Issue and Approach	By Whom	By When	Current Status
	Develop plan to achieve 75%	J. Jones, RN; F. Smith, MD	Next meeting	Data reviewed
Improve bed-to-doctor time	Current: 19 minutes Goal: 15 minutes	All providers	3 months	1. Data reviewed 2. Developing alert system 3. Assess individual providers

TABLE 9.3 ■ Comprehensive Management Action Plan

Topic	Action Step/ Expected Outcome	Measurable Objective	Person Responsible	Start Date	Target Date	Completion Date	P: Progress, B: Barrier, S: Solution
Customer satisfaction	Train staff in AIDET	Checklist	All staff	02/01	03/01	03/01	P–Training complete
	Implement AIDET	Survey	All staff	03/01	05/01	Pending	B–Resistant staff S–Directors to counsel individuals
	Inform patients 54%→90%	Survey	All staff	03/01	06/01	Pending	P–Trained P–90th percentile S–Counsel low performers
	Address pain 37%→75%	EDPECS chart review	Physicians and APCs	04/01	07/01	Pending	P–Protocol adopted B–Inconsistent Rx S–Review individual performance S–Provide feedback

responsible for completion of the actions. The chair may occasionally communicate with the meeting members to check on their progress.

CONCLUSION

Meetings are conducted by, attended by, and intended for *people*. A good meeting:

- is in a comfortable environment,
- values and appreciates its members,
- provides an orderly approach to issues (agenda),
- uses time efficiently, and
- accomplishes its tasks during and after the meeting.

By addressing the needs of the participants, leaders can conduct efficient and effective meetings.

REFERENCES

1. Doyle M, Straus D. *How to Make Meetings Work.* New York, NY: Jove Publications/The Berkley Publishing Group; 1982.
2. Woods RH, Berger R. Making meetings work. *Cornell Hotel Restaur Adm Q.* 1988;29:100-106.
3. Tobia PM, Becker MC. Making the most of meeting time. *Train Dev J.* 1990;44:34-38.
4. Thomas K. *The Firefly Effect: Build Teams That Capture Creativity and Catapult Results.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2009.
5. Wakin E. Make meetings meaningful. *Today's Off.* 1991;25:68-69.
6. Ashenbrenner G. Planning effective meetings. *Buss Cred.* 1988;90:43-46.
7. Bailey J. The fine art of leading a meeting. *Work Wom.* 1987;12:68-70, 103.
8. Blanchard K. Meetings that work. *Today's Off.* 1987;22:9-11.
9. Drucker P. *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done.* New York, NY, Harper Collins Publishers; 2006.
10. Surveys by Thom Mayer MD of >3,500 attendees at ACEP's Emergency Department Directors Academy 2004–2018.
11. Sanders EG. *Do You Really Need to Hold That Meeting, HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter.* Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press; 2016.
12. Kirkpatrick DL. *How to Conduct Productive Meetings: Strategies, Tips, and Tools to Ensure Your Next Meeting is Well Planned and Effective.* Alexandria, Va: ASTD Press; 2006.
13. Michaels EA. Business meetings. *Small Buss Rep.* 1989;14:82-88.
14. Stevenson A. Decisions are better made as a group. http://www.spring.st/libby-vanderploeg. Accessed May 18, 2018.
15. Strauss R, DeHart D. Administrative responsibilities. In: Strauss R, ed. *Contracts: A Practical Guide to Emergency Physicians.* Dallas, Tex: ACEP; 1990.
16. Strauss R, DeHart D. Medical staff interrelationships and clinical responsibilities. In: Strauss R, ed. *Contracts: A Practical Guide to Emergency Physicians.* Dallas, Tex: ACEP; 1990.
17. iToolkit.com. How to lead conference calls for optimum participation and results. https://www.ittoolkit.com/articles/lead-conference-calls. Accessed May 21, 2018.
18. Streibel BJ. *Plan and Conduct Effective Meetings: 24 Steps to Generate Meaningful Results.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill; 2007.
19. Schwarz R. *How to Design an Agenda for an Effective Meeting, in HBR Guide to Making Every Meeting Matter.* Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press; 2016.
20. Cathcart J. How to plan a meeting. *Market Commun.* 1987;12:82-83.
21. Linkemer B. *How to Run a Meeting.* New York, NY: AMACOM; 1987.
22. Wikipedia, "Bloom's taxonomy." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom%27s_taxonomy. Accessed May 18, 2018.
23. Streibel BJ. *Manager's Guide to Effective Team Meetings.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill; 2003.
24. Frank MO. *How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time.* New York, NY: Pocket Books; 1989.
25. Janis I. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes.* London, England: Wadsworth Publishing; 1982.
26. Jewett M, 3M Meeting Management Team. *How to Run Better Business Meetings: A Reference Guide for Managers.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill; 1991.
27. Zaremba A. Meetings and frustration. *Supervision.* 1989;49:7-9.
28. Sigband N. Meeting with success. *Personnel J.* 1985;19:48-55.
29. Markman A. How to run a meeting without talking too much. *Harvard Business Review.* May 3, 2018. Accessed May 19, 2018.
30. Osborn AF. *Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures of Creative Problem-Solving.* New York, NY: Scribner;1979.
31. Delbecq AL, VandeVen AH. A group process model for problem identification and program planning. *J Applied Beh Sci VII.* 1971;466:91.
32. Bean GJ. Don't let a dominator spoil the meeting for everyone. *Marketing Commun.* 1989;22:6.
33. Fisher R, Ury W, Patton B. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In.* New York, NY: Penguin Books; 2011.
34. iToolkit.com. The meeting is over. Now it's time to evaluate and improve! https://www.ittoolkit.com/articles/post-meeting-assessment, Accessed May 21, 2018.