KANSAS HEALTH MATTERS PARTNERSHIP

Stakeholder Engagement Tools and Tips: Conducting Effective Meetings

Did you know that how you manage and run your meetings is one of the biggest "risk factors" for participation and member investment in your organization or partnership? ALL of the parts of a meeting are important--planning (especially thinking through agendas and goals); logistics; and chairing skills and principles. All of these parts impact on member participation and involvement.

Running or chairing a meeting means more than just moving the group through the agenda. When you chair a meeting, you are responsible for the well-being of the group and the members in it. That demands a certain amount of attention be paid to "group dynamics" and other process issues. All of that "touchy feely" stuff is important! Remember: Running meetings is a SKILL, not something you are born knowing how to do. Just as with any skill, you will get better with practice--and more confident, too!

PHASE I: PLANNING THE MEETING

If you pay attention to planning your meeting, you can avoid the "meeting killers" like:

- Wasting meeting time
- Wasting people's time
- Boring meetings that go nowhere
- Meetings for meeting's sake

Here are the critical steps in planning a great meeting:

1. Decide the goal of the meeting.
Is it to revise the by-laws, plan volunteer recruitment, or something else? Come up with a clear goal and the agenda becomes your road map to getting there.

2. Do your homework!
If you need information or research for the meeting, better have it done before the meeting starts. What happens when you show up at a meeting where important information is missing? It's usually a big waste of time!

3. Decide who needs to be there.
If you are working on a billboard campaign, does the whole membership need to attend or just the Billboard Committee? Think before you send out those meeting notices!

4. Plan with others.
This is a great way to develop new leaders AND get other people more invested in the work of your group! Just get three or four interested folks together and hash out the agenda--it won't take more than an hour!

5. Good agendas count!
List the amount of time you plan for each item. If someone other than you is presenting some part of the agenda, list that too, and SEND IT OUT AT LEAST A WEEK AHEAD OF TIME. Members of any group should know what they are coming to do!

PHASE II: SETTING UP THE MEETING

1. Start and end on time.
It's disrespectful to abuse members' time and about the biggest turn-off there is! Get into the habit of starting on time EVEN if there are only three people in the room. Word will get around and eventually, people will come on time or won't come at all. If people keep showing up late, or not showing up at all, this may be a hint to change your meeting time, or your meeting pattern, or both.

2. Sign them in.
Sign-in sheets do more than tell you who came. They also help update your membership list and give you names for phone trees.

3. "Pardon me, could you move your elbow?"
Meeting spaces should be comfortable and convenient. The room should be centrally located, and the right size for the size of your group. Get there early to set up and try to use a space where you can make a circle, not sit in rows like an auditorium. If the meeting space is hard to get to for seniors or others, try to arrange transportation or perhaps a volunteer "escort" service.

4. All work and no play is no good!
Have informal time before and after the meeting for people to talk and socialize. That's a big reason people joined your group in the first place, and it's where you can recruit volunteers. Remember, sometimes "the meeting after the meeting" is where people get attached to the group--and also get their best ideas to bring to the next meeting!

5. A regular cycle
If you have a regular meeting cycle, people will start to save the date (e.g. the first Monday of the month); but DON'T HAVE A MEETING JUST TO MEET! Always have a clear goal or don't have the meeting.

PHASE III: RUNNING THE MEETING

1. Do introductions
Don't forget how good icebreakers can be to loosen everyone up! An icebreaker is something short at the beginning of the meeting to help people get to know each other or dig out some important piece of information in a fun or interesting way. For example, your group could do a "Scavenger Hunt" where people "scavenge" information about each other.

2. Get agreement on agenda and rules
Remember, it's everyone's meeting, so everyone needs to "buy in" to the agenda. You can ask for feedback on the agenda before you begin. Rules like no interrupting, etc. can also be helpful if you have some potential "disrupters" in the house.

3. Keep the discussion on track
If someone's going off the agenda or is speaking too long, pull them back in! Be gentle but firm: people respect a meeting that's run well and remember all too clearly the meetings where someone was allowed to go on and on and on.

4. Watch the time!
Remember about starting and ending! Honor agenda time limits. If the group seems to want to go beyond the agreed upon time on an issue, ask for agreement from all members.

5. Summarize what you hear
Wrap-up each agenda item by summarizing any conclusions out loud. Then move on when no one objects or everyone agrees.

6. Encourage participation
If a usually quiet person speaks, show your appreciation. Try to draw everyone in and not just let the usual suspects speak!

7. Use the power of your position wisely
Watch what you say and how and how much you say it! Don't take sides, and be fair to everyone. If you are passionate about an issue on the agenda and want to speak, make an arrangement BEFORE the meeting for someone else to chair that section.

8. Develop new leaders by handing over the gavel
Try rotating chairing responsibility. The only way others will learn is by watching you and then doing.
Some tips for managing people in the meeting:
* Have a sense of humor, and don't be defensive.
* Use open-ended questions that require people to say more than "yes" or "no."
* Look around the room and watch for signs that you should slow things down or speed them up.

PHASE IV: FOLLOWING UP ON THE MEETING

1. Gather feedback from the group.
You will want to gather information about how the participants felt about the meeting, what could be improved, etc. You may not want to do this at every meeting, but at least once in a while; making sure that people have clear assignments, setting or reaffirming the date for the next meeting, and maximizing opportunities for people to stay around and talk after the meeting (which is very important).

2. Make follow-up calls
The Chair or a designated person may want to make follow-up calls, send out follow -up correspondence, and/or take some follow-up actions. These after-the-meeting activities often serve as the glue that hold the group together.

3. Summarizing the meeting
It's helpful to have a list of the decisions made, with follow-ups. Formal minutes are valuable for many (not all) organizations--they contain announcements, informational items, etc., that are important to report even though they are not "decisions. "
Writing up minutes can be boring, and so can reading them. But that's part of the job the secretary took on. Some alternatives can include:
* Have a volunteer do a meeting summary sheet, in addition to the minutes
* Have the minutes read more like a story than a formal roman-numerals-type report. Also, place the decisions made in boldface or ALL CAPS, so they stand out. Ditto for follow-ups.

Resources:
Community Tool Box: http://ctb.ku.edu