

Reflection on Meetings: Here's What. So What? Now What?

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Initiative Name: Increasing Parent Involvement

Here's What.

- I had 10 meetings between 35-45 minutes long (7=45, 1=40, 2=35)
- 6 of my meetings occurred on a Wednesday (6=Wed, 1= Sun, Mon, Tues, Thurs)
- 9 of my meetings were 95% dialogue and discussion, 5% information (9=95%, 1=90%)
- All my meetings had an energizer
- In all my meetings we quickly revisited the common agreements
- All but one meeting was in my classroom (1=Kawthar's room)
- My meeting attendance ranged between 4-8 people (1=4, 1=5, 6=6, 1=7, 1=8)
- 6 of my meetings had 6 people
- 8 of my meetings started at 2:00 (1=12:40, 1=9:45, 8=2:00)
- 8 times we processed all the items on the agenda, 2 times we did not.
- No patterns about dates.
- Seating plan – 9 circles, 1 square (square=Kathar's room)
- I had members of the Executive Council at 4 of my meetings.
- 5 agendas had 3 points, 2 had 4 points, 2 had 5 points, 1 had 2 points

So What?

I can infer the following:

- Wednesday was a good day to meet at first. (It had to change as there were conflicts with other meetings).
- 2:00 was a good time to meet
- The seating plan was consistent (A circle worked well and I was a citizen facilitator)
- 45 minutes was the optimum meeting time. (I often gave small tasks and readings to people by email ahead of time to prepare people for the meetings. We considered meeting more often for less time but decided to go back to the original format)
- Aside from one time, the place was consistent. (I feel routine is important – same day, same place, same time – people are less likely to forget).
- There is a strong emphasis on dialogue and discussion at the meetings. (This is purposeful. Information and “administrivia” were limited or sent in emails.)
- 6 people was a good number. (Although a few members changed, I kept it at 6 on purpose because I felt it was a good number. Occasionally we had special guests in to present to us, as well as give us feedback on possible actions.)

Now What?

***“You gotta know when to hold them, know when to fold them,
know when to walk away, and know when to run.”***

Kenny Rogers ~ The Gambler.

As I mentioned in my WOC post, I have learned a lot about running meetings, and how I want my meetings to be structured. I learned this from the courses we took, but if I am honest, I also learned a lot from the painful meetings I have had to attend, especially in the past two years.

For me, a good meeting has an agenda, so I know what to expect. The agenda might not always be mailed out ahead of time, but it is important to give people a brief notification ahead of time about what the meeting is about. I feel this is important for all meetings, whether between a large group, or just two people. This gives people the chance to prepare. In addition to my agenda, I often sent out emails ahead of time to prepare my members – that way they came already having thought about ideas that they wanted to contribute. This is something that I will continue to do, and if I am ever in a leadership position if I request a meeting, I will always tell the person what it is about. I should actually do this as a teacher as well – if I need to meet with a student, I should at least tell them what it is about. I have also learned the importance of sending out the minutes, so that you have a record, but also to keep people updated who have missed the meeting. Lastly, I have learned that it is important to stick as close as possible to the agenda if necessary. I always had a little section for extras, but I worked very hard NOT to overwhelm people and as time went on, I tried to keep the agenda items between to 3-5. We were almost always able to accomplish this. (I learned this after the second meeting when I realized I had included way too much). I understand that sometimes unanticipated subjects come up, but a good leader will have strategies for dealing with these instances and will make a judgement call about whether to deviate from the agenda, or to put these subjects in the parking lot for later. For me, the most important thing is to keep an eye on time and follow time limits. If you have scheduled 30 minutes for a discussion/dialogue, remind people of the time, and have them start to wrap it up. It is also very important to be respectful of people’s time and they will be more likely to attend your meetings if they know that you are prepared, organized, and will end on time. This is something else that I will continue to use in my future meeting planning.

I think the other major take away for me has been the importance of limiting administrivia. Most of the meetings I have attended in the past two years have been about the dissemination of information. I understand that this is important, but to me, it is a waste of time. Most of these meetings could have been eliminated by sending out emails. (In defense, I do know that teachers here are not very good at reading their emails). For me, the purpose of a meeting is to dialogue and discuss. For people to feel that a meeting was useful, they need to feel that they have contributed and been an active participant. For this reason, I sent out the administrivia ahead of time, which enabled me to use our precious time together to actually dialogue and discuss. I also prepared people ahead of time by giving them a task to do, or something to think about so that they could come prepared to discuss. This will be something else I will continue

to use in my future meeting planning.

It is not in my data, but as I was referring back to my notes, I was reminded that one of my goals was to use closure more effectively as well as to integrate the common agreements more. Because I had a few new group members, we did revisit the common agreements at the beginning but as we became more established, our attention to the common agreements was cursory at best. Nonetheless, from this experience, I have learned about the importance of common agreements in establishing group norms, and when I lead a group in the future, I will be sure to incorporate them. As for closure, I used a survey several times as a form of exit card, and I had people reflect on how we did as a group. I think this was a good exercise as people became more purposeful about their contributions as group members. Other than this, for my group, I don't think a closing activity or exit card was necessary because we were small, and if people were confused, they just asked me during the meeting. Perhaps this is something I should try again but I find it more beneficial in a class than in a meeting. But this might give shy people a chance to contribute. However my group was small and very functional – I think people felt very safe to share.

The last thing is not in my data as well, but it is the importance of the extra preparation – the emails sent out ahead of time, and the follow up. When you only meet once a month, you want to use the time between to accomplish certain tasks, and to reflect. I felt this was one thing I did very well, and something I will continue to do: follow up with people by email and give them about a week pre-reminder. Being so organized, when I sent out the minutes, I would let people know roughly the next meeting a month in advance to ensure people kept that date free. Then I would send out an email a week before to remind people. I would also touch base with people in person that day to remind them of the meeting.

If I am honest with myself, I feel that I run a very organized and planned meeting. In fact, I became even better and more purposeful about running a meeting. Running meetings was not my problem. I feel my initiative failed because of other external factors – lack of support being the major one. I will be the first to admit that as time went on, I started to “play very small” because I realized how tiny my sandbox was. I also realized that there was no point in wasting my energy on things I could not change.

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I really thought that my initiative and I would have more of an impact on the school, and would be able to accomplish more. I had some very influential people attend my meetings. It is hard for me to look back and feel like such a failure; I am not used to failing. I think the biggest takeaway for me, aside from knowing when to quit, is that successful meetings are not always where the real action takes place. I think I realized early on that my initiative wasn't going to succeed, but because I wanted to continue the leadership certificate, I just became very good at having meetings and appearing to be doing something. I feel so pathetic saying that, but it is the truth, and I know that I am not the only person to say or feel that. In fact, confidentially, several others in a position of power have basically stated that the school only paid lip service

to most of the initiatives. **Even so, it is very hard for me not to look back and wonder if perhaps I am just a poor leader; however, I honestly don't know what else I could have done differently. Maybe I didn't learn any real leadership skills except how to make an agenda and run a meeting. I really am at a loss as to what I would do next time to make my initiative more of a success.**

Making an agenda and running a meeting is important, but there is a lot more to leadership than just that. A leader needs to move a vision to action – unfortunately, I don't feel I know or learned how to do that. Perhaps I needed to be better at following up with the decision makers, and being more persistent? I had the ear of the superintendent – did I use it as effectively as I could? Or did I really have his ear? Perhaps I needed to do more on my own, and not have depended on the group as much? Perhaps I should have pushed more and made myself more of a presence and been more vocal? Maybe I needed to work harder behind the scenes, outside of the meeting-time, to make my vision a reality? It is really hard for me to reconcile what I could have done with the actual reality of the situation. How does one reconcile persistence with knowing when to quit? Maybe the fact of the matter was – I knew my initiative wasn't going anywhere, and there was no point in me wasting my time or my energy, so I cut my losses. As I stated in my narrative, in these past two years, I have learned lessons I didn't want to learn, but perhaps those were the lessons I needed to learn at this time about teaching, leadership, and life.