

Are regular meetings with the instructors in your department really necessary? Absolutely! Staff meetings strengthen team spirit, reinforce your leadership and keep your department running smoothly. Yet many directors feel they lack the skills for conducting meetings, so they avoid them—or don't

bigger the group is, the harder it is to assemble everyone, so monthly, bimonthly or quarterly meetings tend to be the norm. In any case, limit the length. "Anything over 2 hours and you start to lose people," says Deborah Low, fitness, health and wellness programmer for the North Vancouver Recreation Commission.

Advertise Early. Announce the meeting 3 to 4 weeks in advance. As the date approaches, remind instructors, using various communication modes (group e-mails, a colorful notice by the stereo, phone calls). Let instructors know their attendance is expected, but also request that they RSVP. People who commit to a meeting in advance are less likely to blow it off at the last minute. Knowing how many people will turn up also helps you draw up an agenda. (A larger group generally takes more time on each topic.)

Preparing an Agenda

Outline Discussion Points. The purpose of an agenda is to list and organize discussion points in advance. This helps you focus your objectives, manage time and stay on track during the meeting. "When you have a concise agenda, your meeting runs itself," Low says.

A good agenda is specific and detailed. (See "Sample Meeting Agenda.") Itemize all the issues to be discussed, listing the most important topics first. Next, allocate an ideal timeline for each item. This tells you whether you planned too much for the allotted time and helps you pace discussion during the meeting.

Incorporate adequate time for questions, comments and group interaction.

Conducting Effective Meetings

Plan short, focused, interactive meetings your staff will want to attend!

By Amanda Vogel, MA

Meeting Basics at a Glance

1. Choose a meeting time that works for all staff members.
2. Set an agenda that lists and prioritizes the issues to be discussed.
3. Find ways to motivate attendance.

have them often enough. Once you have a clear blueprint for organizing meetings, you'll find the process much less intimidating.

Setting the Stage

Pick a Time. Choosing a date and time that maximizes attendance takes some forethought. Consider your instructors' typical availability and family responsibilities, as well as events happening around town. If there's a community fun run slated for the weekend you had in mind, or if you always have a tough time securing subs for Sunday morning classes, it may be best to avoid those times when scheduling.

Determine the Length. The meeting's length may depend on the size of your group and the frequency of your get-togethers. If you have a small staff and hold weekly meetings, you can probably keep them pretty short. But the

Sample Meeting Agenda

Introductions: 3 minutes

Recognition and highlights: 5 minutes

New procedures for stereo and microphone: 5 minutes

Recent schedule changes: 4 minutes

Valentine's Day fundraiser: 6 minutes

Handling class latecomers: 20 minutes

Ways to increase customer service: 20 minutes

Questions, info sharing and prize drawing: 12 minutes

Choreography swap: 15 minutes

You want to encourage participation, so your agenda should reflect that. Low opens her meetings with a “recognition and highlights” segment, during which staff members recognize coworkers or successes at the facility. She closes the session with “information sharing,” an open forum that allows attendees to share their own announcements and suggestions.

You may want to distribute the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, or keep it to yourself if you think it will be a distraction.

Focus on Time Management. The agenda's point-by-point timeline will help you start and end the meeting on time. But once you get going, you may discover that a particular topic warrants further discussion than you anticipated; in this case, you can defer the less pressing points (at the bottom of your agenda) to a future gathering.

If you find yourself running behind schedule because the discussion has veered off the topic, announce the number of agenda items still remaining, then move on. “Make sure people feel heard,” says Low, “but use your leader-

ship skills to come back to the discussion points.” To accomplish this, you might say, “We still have a number of important items to cover, so we have to close discussion on this topic for now.” Always end on time. “Sticking to the schedule tells staff you respect their time,” Low stresses.

Motivating Attendance

Nothing is worse than diligently planning a meeting only to have a fraction of your instructor team show up. While your preparatory efforts help, what happens *during* meetings is what usually matters most.

Encourage Interaction. Pay close attention to both the topics you address and the way you deliver your message. People don't want to listen to a boring lecture that makes them feel their presence is totally unnecessary. According to Eduardo Perez, the director of fitness at Canyon Ranch Health Resort in Tucson, Arizona, simply reciting a speech about policies and procedures can make you sound like the adults in the Peanuts cartoons: “Wah-wah-wah-wah.”

Low agrees, adding, “The way to

motivate your instructors to attend a meeting—and participate during it—is to give them a purpose for being there. They should have a vested interest in the discussion.”

Perez advises that you ask yourself: “What do I want the team to get out of this meeting?” Then outline a few main objectives of interest to all instructors—such as how to handle class latecomers or what to do to bolster customer service. This will improve the meeting's productivity, encourage interaction, help instructors retain information and prevent the session from becoming a dry lecture about regulations.

Bring on the Perks. Of course, luring instructors with goodies helps too! If your budget does not allow you to pay instructors for their meeting attendance, says Low, you can at least offer perks. “Cookies always help,” she laughs.

Other perks include drawings with prizes like CDs, videos or movie tickets. You could also “pad” the paychecks of instructors who attend by adding a bonus of \$10 or so to the payment for the next class they teach. You might organize a short postmeeting workshop for complimentary continuing education credits, or set time aside for instructors to swap choreography ideas.

Make It Fun. The chance to socialize increases a meeting's appeal. “We once started a meeting by creating a rap song for our fitness team,” Perez says. The main purpose for a meeting

Resources

Secrets of Successful Speakers: How You Can Motivate, Captivate and Persuade by Lilly Walters (McGraw-Hill Trade, 1993).

7 Steps to Fearless Speaking by Lilyan Wilder (John Wiley & Sons, 1999).

Public Speaking Anxiety?

Do you yearn to hold a formal get-together for the instructors you supervise, but find that the thought makes your palms sweat and your heart pound? If so, try these anxiety-reducing tips:

- Use positive visualization. Picture yourself feeling confident and comfortable as you conduct a successful meeting.
- Practice speaking aloud—by yourself or in front of a friend. Rehearse the points on your agenda. Getting used to the sound of your voice and practicing how you will verbalize your thoughts makes you feel more confident.
- Make the meeting as interactive as possible. Think of it as a large group discussion rather than a speech to an audience.
- Promote a sociable atmosphere. Use eye contact, smiles and conversation to connect with each of your instructors before and during the meeting.
- Breathe deeply to promote relaxation.

might be to discuss serious work-related issues, but promoting a social atmosphere makes for a livelier discussion and encourages participation. For example, have everyone sit in a circle so they face one another. If there are new instructors present, or you've assembled instructors from a

number of facilities, ask everyone to introduce themselves.

Holding effective, motivating meetings is easy—it all boils down to the right mix of careful planning, strong leadership and creative thinking.

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