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21M.735 Tech Note 1: Organization

Running a Meeting

Meetings are the way that things get done in any organization or when working on a project such as a theatrical production. They bring together lots of different people with different pieces of knowledge necessary to get things moving, and together, they move progress toward the goal. This is done by generating consensus and disseminating information to the different parts of the group. Without meetings, there would be no centralized goal and advancement. However, a poorly organized or executed meeting can be one a very painful experience. It may waste the time of everyone in attendance by not fulfilling the goals of consensus and dissemination, and in a situation where tasks are at hand that need attention, this is unacceptable.

In large part, success or failure of a meeting is contingent upon the person leading the meeting. It is up to him or her to decide a focus for the meeting, to move the attendees in the direction of consensus, and make sure each person feels like his or her personal needs are being met. Meetings can be very stressful for the leader for these reasons: if the meeting fails, it is likely because the leader failed. For this reason, I have put together below a list of tips and suggestions for any leader trying to run an effective and worthwhile meeting.

Group Members

- Perhaps more than any other factor, the way the leader can work toward a successful meeting is to know his or her team.
- One malcontent group member can cause disruption sufficient to spoil the meeting for everyone else. Thus it is very important that the group leader be attuned to the needs and desires of all group members.
- The best way to be aware of each group member's personality is to develop a relationship with them outside of the meeting. This can be done before or after the meeting, in confirming meeting business with the member, or getting their feedback on the meeting or a particular project. If the leader demonstrates a

genuine interest in the group members, they will return that respect during the meeting.

- This is also a very good way to get dynamic feedback that will help the leader improve his or her skills, leading to better progress for the group as a whole. That is, if the leader is discussing a meeting that just happened, the member may point out that the particular needs of one of the group members wasn't being met, that the leader may not have seen.

Agendas

- A good agenda is the backbone of a successful meeting. It provides guidance for the flow of the meeting, and makes sure all issues get their fair share of time.
- It can be very helpful to make sure all group members get input into formulating the agenda before the meeting; e-mail is a great way to do this. It falls to the leader to decide what goes in and what doesn't, but allowing everyone to contribute decreases the chances that something will be missed.
- Agendas should ideally be distributed a day or two before the meeting, to allow group members to prepare for the discussions or presentations, and to make sure nothing got left out. It is also a good idea to have printed out copies of the agenda or an overhead projected copy at the meeting, so group members will be familiar with the agenda.
- The leader must balance the need to keep to the agenda with the possibility of new business coming up in the course of discussion. He or she must determine when to stick by the agenda, and when to deviate. It can be helpful if new issues come up, rather than discussing them at the moment, to write them down and table them for the end of the meeting or the next meeting.

Meeting Flow

- A good meeting length is one hour. This is usually long enough to cover all business, but not too long that it starts becoming trying to sit through it all. If there is too much business for an hour, consider taking breaks in between.
- The first meeting of any body can set the tone for the rest of the meetings. Thus it is very important that it flow smoothly and that the leader maintain a good presence. It is often helpful to agree as a group on some ground rules for the

meeting: i.e. encouraging the input of all members, respecting different opinions, being mindful of the agenda, etc. These can be written on a large sheet of paper, and posted at subsequent meetings.

- If time permits, it can be helpful at the first meeting to have group members introduce themselves and give some background as to their experiences and strengths. This will give the members a better knowledge about each other, and make sure each person feels comfortable addressing the group.
- The leader should be surveying the group members during the meeting, watching body language to catch unexpressed issues or feelings. He or she can call on people to speak who might not have otherwise expressed their opinions.

Meetings can be stressful, but with a little advance planning and an eye to keeping members happy, almost anyone can be a successful leader.