

I was delighted when I recently discovered that my article "How to be a better chairman" was the only article surviving from the 1960s in the Harvard Business Review's selection of "the Best of Best". Based on the frequency and size of demand, its inclusion shows just how important and difficult a part of our lives meetings continue to be.

During the past quarter century there have been many changes, large and small, in the ways we speak and think. Nowadays we are no longer allowed to talk about "chairmen" but have to talk about chairpersons". If I were to write my article now, I might abolish the whole concept of "chair" and use the term "process leader".

What follows is the essence of my 25-year-old article. I've shortened it considerably, but the message is the same: it is possible to run more productive meetings if the person in the chair understands the group dynamics and knows clearly what skills a leader needs.

Many people are cynical about the time spent in meetings. Often they fail, though, because of hidden agendas, lack of candour and waste of talent. On the basis of thousands of meetings observed over the years, I have found that even mild rejection has a significant negative effect on people; pointing out flaws in others' ideas occupies too much time; while approval has a positive effect and creates a climate for resolution of the problem.

Successful meetings take place in an atmosphere in which participants need not defend themselves or their ideas. When relieved from the burden of self protection everybody can wholeheartedly devote themselves to the meeting. To draw creative contributions from everyone in the group, a chairperson must use his or her wits, plenty of tact, and some new

TIPS FROM THE TOP

Just as timely 25 years on . . .

George Prince, retired co-founder of US consultancy Synectics, on running better meetings

rules of order.

The process of running a meeting could go like this. Having briefly headlined the problem, preferably in the format of "How to...?" or "How can I...?", the chair should ask the member with most knowledge of and involvement in the problem to explain it in more detail. Meanwhile, participants listen and make notes about associations, ideas, and new perspectives.

The chair then encourages participants to be as wishful about the solving of the problem as they can. All wishes will be recorded on a flip chart for all to see. It has been found that the wilder the wish, the more likely it is to evoke a starting point for possible solutions.

When people offer their ideas, the chair has to protect them from all attacks. He/she needs to force members to see positive value in each idea. "What do you like about A's suggestion?" the chair can ask. Only after making notes on several valuable aspects of it, can the concerns be brought up. By recognizing everybody's views, the chair keeps the climate non-aggressive and people are more willing to contribute.

In order to increase the probability of finding a novel approach, the chair can apply a technique that is considered outrageous by many, creating an artificial, instant "excursion" from the problem.

He/she instructs. "Please put the problem out of your mind. Now can

anyone think of a striking image in the world of weather?" Members begin to offer examples, and the chair records them all. They select one and discuss its implications. The "excursion" time can last from 5 to 15 minutes depending on the members' skill in keeping off the original problem.

Using the "excursion" material, the chair asks the members to connect it back to the original problem. These connections are usually unthought of and highly speculative. Exciting new ideas are then developed, all members adding to and building upon each other's suggestions until it reflects the constructive energies of the group.

In summary, the 10 leadership principles for the role of chairperson are:

1. Never compete with the group members. Give members' ideas precedence over your own.
2. Listen to every group member. Paraphrase, do not judge.
3. Don't permit anyone to be put on the defensive. Assume value in all ideas.
4. Use every member of the group. Control the dominating ones without alienating them.
5. Keep the energy levels high. Your own interest and alertness are contagious.
6. Keep members informed about where they are and what is expected of them. Keep notes on flip charts for all to see.
7. Keep your eye on the expert (the problem owner). Check with him/her whether an idea is worth pursuing further and when a proposed solution is satisfactory.
8. Rotate turns in the managing of meetings. To learn to lead is to learn how to participate, and when the chair rotates, everyone learns.
9. Do not manipulate the group.
10. Work hard at the technique of chairing a meeting.



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