



MEETINGS THAT WORK

How to make time spent in meetings time well spent.

BY LAURA MORIARTY, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, TAHOE TRAINING PARTNERS

You can tell a lot about the health of a resort and the team that operates it by sitting in on a variety of their meetings. What might an industry professional from another resort notice if he or she dropped in on yours?

At one meeting, the visiting stranger overhears a cohesive senior team that has obviously carved out time to tackle strategic issues head on. They are direct, courageous, and vulnerable enough to challenge each other in lively debate. Their robust dialog is punctuated by easy laughter.

Peeking in to watch another meeting, the stranger sees technically savvy mid-level operational managers who are clearly empowered to try new approaches. They are sketching out potential solutions to tactical issues in bright colors on a white board.

So far, so good.

At the next meeting, a morning department huddle, he can intuit from the bored expressions on the faces of sleepy line-level team members that a Groundhog-Day talking head is lecturing. The speaker is not pausing to ask for questions, presumably for the sake of “efficiency.” This guy feels a need to cover his routine information quickly so

he can get the team positioned for “the real work.”

SUCCESS IS IN THE SYSTEMS

Think about the “systems” that organize your resort. From the morning routine of opening for business, to loading guests on chairs and to preparing signature dishes the same way every time, all the way through sweep at the end of the day—your systems ensure continuity of best practices.

Meetings are the most mission-critical of all systems. They are the lubrication that keeps your operation humming at peak performance. They are where you persuade, inspire, and motivate others to greatness. They provide the venue in which people can build relationships, express thoughts and feelings, and exchange information so they can do their jobs, achieve goals, and learn. Meetings are the mechanism that guarantees a consistent platform for information flow.

And that flow goes two ways. Your people crave inside information and want to be kept in the loop about what’s happening and why. But they also want their opinions heard, and to count.

All of that makes communication a tough business. Whether you are run-

ning a mega destination resort with many layers of management, or a lean and mean day resort with a flat hierarchy, communication takes effort.

THREE TYPES OF MEETINGS

Every meeting at your resort should have a purpose. Defining the purpose, or the type of meeting, before gathering is a good first step.

The different meetings our resort visitor observed each fall under one of three categories: strategic, tactical, and informational. The senior team scenario was “strategic,” typically held for goal setting, visioning, team building, capex planning, etc. The mid-management vignette was for “tactical problem solving,” typically held weekly to empower operating and frontline management to get things done. Tactical meetings may also be scheduled ad hoc as needed for specific challenges.

The uninspired, frontline team member meeting was “informational,” a download of always-changing guest and employee information.

These are the meetings that populate the schedule of the resort staff’s annual calendar. They are mechanisms for planning, communication flow, and

execution. They are scheduled with consistency, like any other resort system.

COMMUNICATION IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Of course, great meetings of any type don't happen by accident. It takes effort to make them energizing and compelling. Too often, we wing it, making the upcoming meeting just another obligation, using a routine agenda with the same personalities leading and dominating conversations.

So take a cue from your marketing, public relations and social media strategists. They have engineered the path to keeping external guests and consumers engaged. They promote the brand with carefully crafted messages. Engaging your internal people needs to be thoughtfully orchestrated as well. The-
matic messages that underscore your values, cultural and guest expectations should flow from the top down to line level each week.

Why do some messages fall through the cracks? Because responsibility for communicating these messages often falls to well-intentioned but heavily burdened managers who are expected to cascade them throughout their functional business units. Some are great communicators, others not so much. All, however, must get your messages across.

Your goal is to transform all managers into solid communicators. Team members want to be the first to know, and to hear it directly from their leaders—way before they see it on Facebook or overhear insider information on line at the grocery store.

HOW TO BE INTERESTING

Creative meeting leadership is not a deliberately developed management skill in most companies. Still, you undoubtedly have some leaders who are “naturals” at engaging people. They come up with interesting ways to deliver information. Don't take that for granted! Consciously or not, these leaders have cultivated that talent. They have learned to structure content, make overlapping points, tell personal stories, use their body language and voices effectively, and incorporate participants' names into their remarks.

Other leaders can adopt these tac-

A CADENCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

There's a flow to your meeting schedule. The senior team should meet collectively first, and later with additional department head/planning managers, on a weekly basis. This senior team should be quite small: it is difficult to be agile and make decisions with more than six direct reports. Often, midweek (Wednesday, say) works for senior management to review previous weekend business, mitigate pressing issues, deploy resources, and prepare for the next operating week.

To cascade information effectively, and to ensure that senior-level discussions and decisions are carried out by operating managers, the senior team may choose to meet with department head/planning managers the following day, Thursday.

The working managers of large departments and interdisciplinary teams (often mountain operations departments, profit centers, events/marketing/sales, and snow sports teams) should meet with their teams weekly, for tactical problem solving and to ensure proper planning and execution.

If your resort has 60 or fewer leaders and you have viable space, you can convene a weekly informational meeting where all key management-level communicators hear all the key messages at once. Often scheduled on Friday morning, this one-hour meeting is social, structured so many voices can be heard, and prepares everyone for the weekend regarding all the aspects of resort operations. Leads and supervisors can rotate in throughout the season so they feel like insiders, too.

Working team managers cascade relevant information to supervisors within their departments so that supervisors can pass this along to frontline team members on Saturday mornings. Supervisors should make daily huddles interesting, and also ensure information from the line level ascends back to leadership.



tics, too. Some of the best communicators take a story they see on the web or hear on news radio on the morning drive, and draw parallels between that item of interest and life at the resort. They use anecdotes, innovations in and outside of our industry, stories about things our people care about—health, lifestyle, tales of great athletes, adventures, action sports, sustainability, the environment, even family and friends—to energize routine meetings and conversations.

Their best tactic is that when they feel like telling, they ask instead. Instead of lecturing blah-blah-blah and telling team members what they need to do to be ready for a big weekend or to take better care of the guest, they ask them what should be done. They let their people shine.

BEST PRACTICES FOR MEETING FACILITATION

While strategic, tactical and informational meetings each may have different purposes and expected outcomes, they begin with four key steps:

1. State the meeting purpose.
2. Describe the expected outcome.
3. Define the agenda items.
4. Invite the right people.

That last item can be tricky. There are times when only senior team members and decision makers should be at the conceptual stage, but there are also times when both tactical and technical people need to be side by side with senior management at the drawing board.

Recently, I observed a senior team having a discussion about an important initiative. It kept hitting roadblocks because it didn't have the technical expertise that Tom, the mid-level construction manager, did. Every couple of minutes someone would exclaim, "Let's run this by Tom." Or, "Tom's the go-to guy on this." If this was the case, and the discussion was a planned agenda item, why wasn't Tom invited to the meeting?

Be sure to secure the best location you have available – comfortable with tools for facilitation (white boards, chart paper, markers). Don't cut the food and beverage! It's essential for idea-fueled collaboration and to keep energy alive.

Develop leader/facilitators (titles don't matter) with strong interpersonal skills and the ability to record/para-

phrase ideas on white board or chart paper for visual impact. Use a variety of creative techniques and problem solving formulas to get ideas flowing. Make sure participants feel valued, and that all are encouraged and expected to participate.

Now, some participants are by nature more enthusiastic or domineering than others. They blurt out their ideas with confidence. Others are more measured, weighing every word they say. This is just how different people are hardwired to communicate. If you want everyone in the meeting to discuss ideas, send the agenda and define the problem to be solved ahead of the meeting, so people who need time to formulate and articulate ideas in advance can weigh in. Create the expectation that all participants will bring big ideas to contribute.

Ask participants to rotate through the role of devil's advocate. This will encourage the deeper thinkers to become more spontaneous, and give a break to the person who typically plays that role by default.

Strive for clarity. To that end:

- Reiterate decisions.
- Assign champions and due dates to action items. If everyone is in charge, no one is.
- Take a picture of action items, and
- Always check the previous meeting's action items for completion.

LIGHTNING ROUNDS LOOK FORWARD

Keep informational meetings tightly focused. Don't try to wedge in time for problem solving and participative conversation regarding tactical issues. Informational meetings are just that—a lightning round of information for and from participants. Topics should be looking ahead through the windshield, not for debriefing what's now in the rear-view mirror.

Tactical problems will emerge in this format, but refrain from attempting to solve them there unless you've allocated the time (see "Weekly Meeting Guide"). We've all felt that vibe and seen people roll their eyes when someone elongates a meeting by bringing up ideas or issues that need a deeper dive. Ask the interested parties to convene an ad hoc meeting to tackle that one issue, and to be pre-

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BRAINSTORMING BULLETIN BOARD

PLACE A BULLETIN BOARD IN A CENTRAL LOCATION, AND WRITE THE PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED IN BRIGHT LETTERS IN THE CENTER OF THE BOARD FOR ALL INTERESTED PARTIES TO SEE. ANYONE WITH AN IDEA WRITES IT ON A STICKIE/POST IT. THIS KEEPS THE ISSUE VISIBLE AND TOP OF MIND, AND SPURS IDEAS BY ASSOCIATION. YOU CAN ALSO REWARD PEOPLE FOR THEIR IDEAS. LEAVE IT UP FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIKE.

WEEKLY MEETING GUIDE

Adapted from Pat Lencioni's "Death by Meeting"

I. LIGHTNING ROUND (5-10 MINUTES)

Have each team member list his or her top three priorities for the coming week. This should take no longer than one minute per person, even with a couple of follow-up questions. Note any issues that require further discussion.

II. TACTICAL AGENDA ITEMS (30 MINUTES)

Discuss potential tactical issues. Assign an order for these, and dive in.

III. POTENTIAL STRATEGIC TOPICS (10 MINUTES)

Note topics that should

be addressed in a later strategic meeting. Resist the temptation to resolve them immediately.

IV. DECISIONS/ACTION (5 MINUTES)

Have one team member chart the decisions and actions as they are agreed upon during the meeting. Team leaders should note these as well.

V. CASCADING MESSAGES (5 MINUTES)

Discuss what, if anything, each team member should communicate to his or her direct reports from the meeting. Set a timeframe for these communications.

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pared to report back at the next meeting.

It's important to identify successes and areas for improvement so you don't repeat past mistakes. Plan separate tactical meetings to autopsy what went well or didn't work for events or initiatives. Don't shortchange those issues by burying them in another too-short meeting.

How to manage these other issues as they arise in an informational meeting? Pat Lencioni, author of "Death by Meeting," suggests using a template (see p. 49) on which you can record lightning round items and note when they evolve into tactical or strategic issues.

For example, an idea for capex emerges. This potential strategic topic can be noted, and then discussed at the next strategic/ budget planning meeting. (If you don't value these ideas and revisit them, people will stop offering them.)

Another manager asks for help with

an immediate tactical issue. Add this to the tactical list for problem solving at either a regularly scheduled or ad hoc meeting of key leaders.

Note the space allotted for various options. Vary the spaces to suit your own meeting preferences and needs.

STRATEGICALLY THINKING

Whether you do an end-of-season post mortem or quarterly or six-month long-term vision meetings, it's critical for senior staff to review the "hits and misses" of each department while the information is still fresh. Ask the staff, "what were the three goals/successes you are proudest of having achieved in your department this season, and which are the areas of opportunity or improvement on which to focus next season?" This is also the time when Big Ideas should be raised and evaluated—prior to budget or capex planning.

Getting off-site for high level strategic thinking and team building can be

an important factor for the end-of-season review. At every resort, there's an inherent conflict between the day-to-day operational routine and the larger goals that will move the organization forward. During an off-site retreat, especially a facilitated one, you can come out of the trenches and stretch your collective intellect and management muscle.

WHAT CAN I IMPLEMENT TOMORROW?

Whether you are the GM, a mid-management member, or individual contributor, you have a voice. Ask your frequent collaborators to read this article and highlight three good ideas for discussion. Send out the agenda and get to "cussing and discussing" how to improve your meetings. Your people will thank you.

And you will knock the socks off that next stranger who drops in on one of your meetings. ■

For more on leader development, contact Laura@tahoetrainingpartners.com.

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