

Conducting The Small Meeting

An experienced pastoral leader shares his methods for conducting efficient staff, elders', deacons' or committee meetings.

By Jamie Buckingham

When you think of a group of Christian leaders seated around a conference table, your mind should conjure up the impression of a great reservoir of spiritual power. Unfortunately, instead of a reservoir what you often find is a swamp. Both contain water, but while the reservoir is pure water, waiting to be channeled, a swamp is stale, defies runoff (much less channeled use), and is a breeding place for unpleasant—even dangerous—things.

The leadership meetings described in the Bible are the reservoir kind. The classic meeting is the one described in Acts 15, which was called to settle a dispute between those who felt one way about the Gentile converts and those who felt strongly in the opposite direction. Out of this meeting came results which affect the Church even today.

Another meeting described in Acts 11 actually set the precedent for this later policy-setting meeting. It is a good example of the decision-making process in action.

There are numerous other meetings described in the Bible. Jesus conducted a number of meetings with His disciples. There was that famous meeting in the Upper Room in Acts 2. Then there were smaller meetings, such as the ones between Paul, Barnabas and John Mark; and the meeting of the "prophets and teachers" described in Acts 13, which resulted in Barnabas and Saul being commissioned as the first missionaries.

But most modern leadership meetings such as deacons' meetings, elders' meetings, staff meetings, even (or should

I say especially) church business meetings, fall far short of the productivity found in biblical meetings. For years I conducted such meetings—hundreds of them—which were a sheer waste of time. They were, in Shakespeare's terminology, *much ado about nothing*—full of sound and fury, signifying very little. Others could more accurately be described as a *comedy of errors*. None were productive.

Recently I visited another church and was invited to sit in on the regular weekly staff meeting. It was quite an experience. About halfway through the meeting I started taking notes—not on what the pastor was preaching about (yes, I said preaching), but on what the rest of the staff was doing as he preached. A secretary was filing her nails, the church administrator was writing in his Day-Timer, one of the associate pastors was quietly reading his Bible, the music director was whispering to another secretary, and I was taking notes. None of us were listening to what the pastor was saying.

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According to a recent survey I made, the average pastor spends 72 percent of his workday meeting with two or more people. Thus it is vitally important to know the art of running a meeting—even if you don't call it a meeting—for the principles are the same.

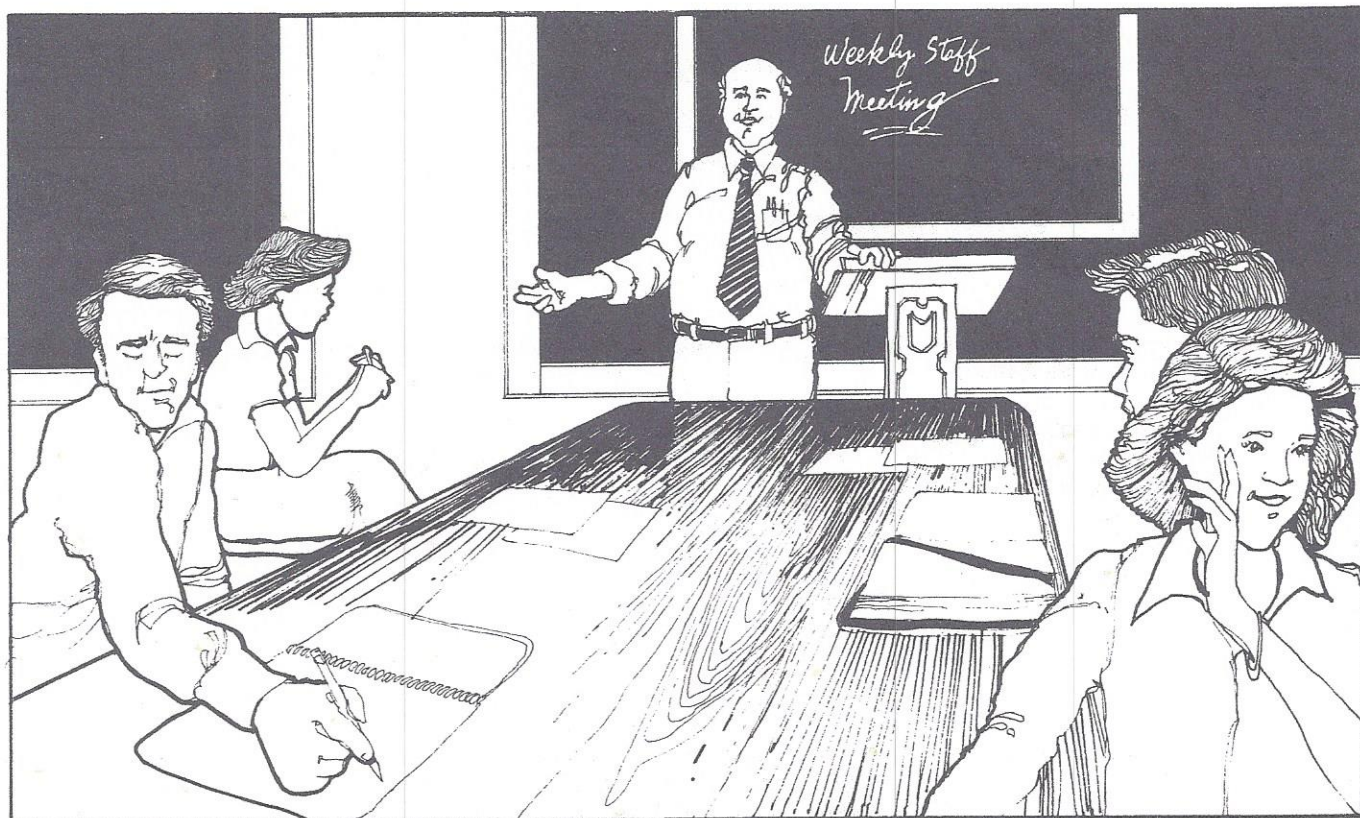
I have had years of experience conducting meetings of every kind—from moderating church business meetings

where the only item on the agenda was the firing of the pastor (me), to deacons' meetings where we went the entire evening debating the placement of fire extinguishers in the building, to moderating "summit conferences," to settling differences in the Charismatic movement, to extremely productive and creative elders' and staff meetings in my present church. Out of this experience, I want to share a few principles which will save you a lot of wasted time (and pain) if followed. They will also assure you of reasonable efficiency and productivity when you do meet. Here then are seven tips for improving the quality of your meetings.

1. *Is this meeting necessary?* The fact it is Tuesday morning and you always hold staff meetings on Tuesday is not sufficient reason for holding a meeting. Too many of us have been in meetings which were not necessary, but were held anyway. Such meetings are best if not held.

There are a number of legitimate reasons for holding meetings. They are necessary to gain feedback to your ideas. They are necessary to communicate with a number of people. Meetings should be held whenever you feel a group will produce better solutions than those made by a solitary decision-maker. Hearing God with a corporate ear is often more effective than hearing Him alone.

But many meetings with a number of people present would have been far more effective if held at the management level alone. For instance, Tuesday is the regular time for our church staff meeting. This includes all our part-time workers,



office secretaries, and occasionally volunteer workers as well. But some Tuesdays we don't need to have a full staff meeting. On those days all our business can be satisfied by calling together the staff pastors. At other times the only meeting necessary is with me, our senior pastor, and our business administrator.

Meetings held to vent your anger or frustration at a staff member or elder are not only unnecessary, they are demoralizing. However, meetings are a perfect place to announce major decision changes, especially those which will generate rumors and time-consuming apprehension about the future. When staff meetings are absolutely necessary, try to include only those staffers whose presence is essential, except those regular meetings when it is necessary to get everyone together for the sake of disseminating information.

2. *Plan ahead.* Many top managers insist the cardinal rule for a good meeting is the leader should spend as much time preparing for the meeting as at the meeting itself. A good portion of that time should be spent in prayer. Specific prayer should be for each person you plan to have present, not to mention prayer for the items to be discussed. I have seen scores, perhaps hundreds, of meetings go awry because the agenda was im-

vised...or left "up to the Holy Spirit to direct us." The result is a lot of shallow talk followed by someone finally saying, "Well, what else should we talk about? I've got a dental appointment."

One of leadership's obligations is to pre-think about such things as "What are the needs of those who will attend?" and "Am I in control of the material to be presented?" A final question needs to be asked: "How will Brother So-And-So respond if the decision goes this way?"

In the first recorded elders' meeting, Moses met with the tribal elders prior to visiting the pharaoh. He knew it was mandatory to have their support before proclaiming the Word of God to the Egyptian leader. Such planning ahead may slow down the process, but in the long run it will speed things up.

The leader also needs to determine the physical setting of the room. In some meetings people should sit in a row facing the leader. Other meetings are best conducted in a circle. Should the leader sit behind a desk, or at the end of a table, or should he stand? Each answer is important. Then there are other things: ventilation, visual aids and refreshments. All are the responsibility of the leader, even though he may appoint someone else to actually handle the logistics.

3. *Prepare an agenda.* The agenda is

the pivotal point of planning a meeting. Every staff meeting, every deacons' or elders' meeting, certainly every church business meeting should have a planned agenda.

Agendas are simple. The wise leader does not set up an agenda by himself. He will consult with his secretary, with whomever kept the minutes of the last meeting (to determine what old business needs to be discussed), and with his administrator—who may or may not be the key person in the planning process. The leader then sets objectives for the meeting, outlines a logical listing of specific topics he wishes to cover, and includes anything postponed or tabled from the last meeting. He might want to circulate his agenda prior to the meeting to give his colleagues an opportunity to be prepared for each item as well as to add subjects which he may have misread.

A good stance is well ordered. One thing I have learned across the years is to put the most important item on the top of the agenda. The novice leader puts these items at the bottom, hoping to "clear the deck" of the less important items. However, these smaller items often eat up the time, leaving no time for the real reason for meeting. That means the best time for confronting dramatic and controversial decisions is early in the

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meeting—right after the first cup of coffee but prior to any earth-shattering crisis.

A well-planned agenda will allocate a specific amount of time for each item to be covered. In the home group my wife and I belong to, our leader allocates at the beginning of each meeting how much time each of the 10 persons in the group will have to “check in.” If, however, one group member has something bothering him, or has to make some kind of crucial decision the coming week, we are free to pause and take as much time as necessary until we feel assured the situation has been covered.

In other words, even though it is right to allocate time limits on each item, the wise leader remains flexible to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The advantage of having a cut-off time for each subject, however, keeps the discussion from dissolving into a digression. The leader’s task is to keep the meetings from meandering by indicating the purpose of each agenda item. For instance: “This is for information only,” or “We need to discuss this thoroughly.” Or, “We need to make a decision on this before we leave.” He also will constantly interject little things such as “We have two minutes left to discuss this before we move on.”

A final word: If you load the agenda with too many varying subjects, you may have the need of covering the material in two briefer meetings rather than one long one.

4. *Don’t be afraid to make decisions.* There are two types of people: those who are *process-oriented* and those who are *goal-oriented*. The process-oriented person seldom makes a good leader. His reason for making the trip is to enjoy the scenery. Whether he reaches his destination is incidental to enjoying the trip.

The goal-oriented person, on the other hand, may enjoy the trip but his primary purpose for traveling is to reach the destination. In fact, he would much rather fly than hike, not because he doesn’t appreciate exercise but his purpose is to get to where he is going. After he arrives,

he’ll play racquetball. For that reason the goal-oriented person usually makes a much better group leader.

Far too many staff or elders’ meetings “get nowhere fast” simply because the leader enjoys hearing people talk—and because the people involved all want to have their say, even if someone else has already said the same thing. The wise leader should always interrupt at that point and say, “We’ve already covered that; let’s move on.”

The classic illustration of a leader who was unafraid to make decisions is found in Acts 15. After hearing both Paul and Peter, the group leader, James, made a binding decision. After quoting Scripture from Amos 9, he outlined his conclusion by saying, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them....”

Using James as the example of a good leader, we can see how a decision-making process not only helps in avoiding aimlessness, but it assures efficiency in reaching goals.

A. *Gather data:* In Jerusalem James listened to both Paul and Peter before making his decision. The wise leader gets all the information he can *before* making his decision.

B. *Define objectives:* In the case of the Jerusalem conference, James knew ahead of time what he needed to accomplish: He needed to reach a conclusion on the “Gentile problem.”

C. *Develop alternatives:* Don’t stop short of considering all the possibilities. Should we send a letter, should we send messengers, or (as they did in Jerusalem) should we have messengers deliver a letter? And, wouldn’t it be a good idea for one of those messengers to be the man who argued against the decision reached—to let the Gentiles know we are standing together in our decision?

D. *Calculate the risks:* James realized his decision could be badly misunderstood not only by the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, but by

modern-day Gentiles as well. Yet in the light of all circumstances, he still felt it was the best decision—and stuck to it.

E. *Follow through on your decision:* The good leader selects the alternative he feels God has approved—then sticks to it. From that point on, he will protect the decision rather than try to eliminate all risks. He does this by establishing controls, providing for feedback, and making secondary support decisions—such as the decision to send Paul along as one of the messengers to the Gentiles.

It is important the leader not get ahead of himself by jumping to quick decisions. Sometimes it is better to hear all the facts, then wait awhile before making a final decision. My own experience has led me to believe that it is best to wait at least 24 hours before making the final decision. That gives God a chance to speak after the meeting is over. I know of very few decisions that cannot be put off a day.

5. *Give the meeting top priority:* If you are going to call a meeting which pulls people away from other important things they could be doing, you need to assure them nothing will interrupt that meeting. Few things are as insulting as to be called to a meeting, then have to wait while the leader reads his mail, excuses himself to answer the phone, or allows other business to interfere with the schedule.

If I am conducting a staff meeting in our church office, I ask the receptionist to hold all but emergency calls until the meeting is over. However, you need to keep in mind a basic premise used by marketing people: “Never make yourself unavailable to a client.” That means cutting off calls, but only to a certain level.

We have found the best way to keep our staff meetings from being interrupted is to hold them from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m.—before the normal workday begins. I have found mornings much better for meetings than late afternoon simply because our minds are fresher and not cluttered with the problems of the day.

We conduct our elders’ meetings “off premises.” IBM, as well as many other companies, often holds staff meetings at

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off-site locations. This has the advantage of lowering chances of interruptions as well as providing a pleasant respite from the week’s ordinary routines. I have discovered we do far better with our elders when we set apart an “all-day Saturday” time for us to meet, usually in the home of one of the men, in a nearby retreat center, or perhaps in a beachfront condo. This allows us time for prayer as well as business meetings.

A final word: Emphasize the meeting will start on time. That means the leader must be there early. But if a key group member cannot be there on time, sometimes it is best to wait a few moments until he arrives rather than having to stop and recap everything for his sake.

6. *Don’t be afraid to lead:* One of the major problems with many modern groups is they try to conduct business without a leader. Somehow it seems more spiritual to say, “The Holy Spirit is our leader.” But as all management experts point out, it is a rare egalitarian group that can operate without some kind of power center. If there is no designated leader, the power evolves out of a pecking order. That may mean the power goes to a person who is not accountable to management or whose values are not those of the rest of the group.

To understand group behavior it is important to look at two psychological processes: aggression and identification. One way or the other, aggression is going to be in the center of group activity. It’s important to recognize aggression in its various forms—one of which is the struggle for leadership.

It is also important to recognize where the group’s identification lies. It may identify with the leader, with the church organization, or with certain values represented by the leader. Or the members of the group may be allied with each other against someone else—which might (God forbid) be the leader.

Ideally the group should be able to identify with its leader and, having

resolved the power issue, channel its aggression into its task.

The best way to accomplish this is to lead—but lightly. Do not dominate the meeting but draw from each person present the best he or she has to offer. Begin your questions by calling each person by his first name. Draw out those who are silent, restrain yourself from any kind of sarcastic answer, and on special occasions give specific and generous affirmation and compliments in front of other staff members.

Except on rare occasions, correction should be left until you can talk privately to the person who has made a mistake. Any military officer knows the wrongness of “dressing down” a subordinate officer in the presence of those subordinate to him.

A good procedure for keeping the discussion going is to call on the senior staff member last. That way junior staff members will not feel intimidated or pressured to parrot superiors.

For morale’s sake, it is good to try to end each meeting on a positive note of accomplishment—just as it is good to begin each meeting on the same high spiritual note of faith.

7. *Be transparent:* Unfortunately, many pastoral leaders believe familiarity breeds contempt. For that reason, these leaders maintain a certain aloofness for the sake of maintaining respect. In reality, however, while this may insulate the leader from intimacy which may, indeed, expose his weaknesses, the final result is the group seeing the leader as unapproachable, distant and therefore unfriendly.

The more a leader gives of himself, the more he will receive in turn from his group. The prime example of this is the staff meeting recorded in John 13. Here Jesus, always in command, brought out the towel and basin and exposed Himself as servant to those who followed. It is the classic picture of the basic paradox of Christian leadership: he who is last shall be first.

Recently the leader of one of America’s largest missionary organiza-

tions began his staff meeting by confessing he had made a mistake which could cost the mission a considerable amount of money. His transparency, instead of causing his followers to lose respect, not only endeared him to them but opened the door for them to be honest in return.

It is not unusual for staff members to approach a staff meeting with great apprehension. They are afraid something is going to happen to them—something unpleasant. I have found if I begin my staff meetings by confessing some weakness or flaw in my own life—and asking them to pray for me—or if I begin the meeting with a brief personal experience, or if I begin by complimenting a staff member for some specific act, the group not only loosens up but moves toward me with love and loyalty.

The wise leader knows the corporate mind is more powerful—and far wiser—than the single mind. He therefore does his best to draw from each person the mind of Christ as it applies to the subject at hand. The highest compliment of any meeting is to have it said, “When the best leader’s work is done, the workers say, ‘We did it ourselves.’” ■

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