

How to Have Better Meetings* **by Bob Young**

Many people do not like meetings. I agree with the humorist who said, “Never put anyone in charge of a meeting who likes meetings.” Church leaders often dislike meetings; participating in meetings is not one of their favorite responsibilities. In meetings, people are often passionate, defensive, resolute, even stubborn. People have different priorities, conflicting personalities, different viewpoints. Not every leader has the same level of training, insights, spiritual growth.

Learning how to have better meetings is an important part of the work of the church because better meetings means better communication, and better communication means better leaders. Here are six guidelines to help you and your church or organization toward better meetings. The first two items relate to developing an agenda. The next four deal with specifics about how to conduct meetings.

Have an agenda.

The agenda should be pre-published so the group can think in advance about the items to be discussed. The preparation of the agenda should include a step that invites agenda items. One goal of the agenda is to exclude reactionary items (usually peripheral) that may come up during the meeting.

An important part of working with an agenda is establishing the mechanism by which agenda items come to the meeting, for example, that agenda items must be presented by a committee.

Identify items that will not be included in the agenda.

In some cases, there may be items that will not be brought up—because the work is in progress, the item is still in committee, is still being investigated, information is being gathered, etc. Such items should be clearly identified in advance with the reason given.

Help everyone know the processes for running meetings.

Every meeting does not have to be run strictly by *Robert’s Rules of Order*, but it is essential that meetings accomplish what needs to be accomplished. A thoughtfully planned, well-run meeting will improve effectiveness. Having good meetings is not difficult. A consistent agenda and some basic ground rules can help make leadership a pleasure.

Focus on harmony; know how to deal with conflict.

Be aware of potential roadblocks and deal with them in advance. Much of the confrontation and many of the problems that come up in meetings are generated by the structure (or lack of structure) in the board or committee. Learn to recognize such problems and deal with them early (preferably by adopting a more workable structure). When confrontation can be expected from certain members because of strongly held views, try to deal with those differences in advance. With the best of preparations, conflict may arise. Make certain that the person charged with conducting the meeting knows how to manage and resolve conflict.

Go straight to hard conversations; the meeting must address what really matters with shared decision making.

Healthy organizations engage in honest conversations. Those who participate in a meeting must be willing to discuss hard topics. Avoid the tendency to spend all the time on old business (much of which is merely tabled again) without getting to the things that matter. The future of the work depends on addressing matters that can eventually disable the work. Working through the hard conversations first forces shared decision-making, and will usually bring the board or committee back to questions of mission (why), strategy (how), and results and measurements (what).

Expect accountability.

Many boards or committees are responsible for overseeing the work of others. Do not be afraid of performance reviews. Making expectations clear is the first step toward success. The committee that reviews the work of others should also be willing to review its own work. The dangers of avoiding accountability are greater than the challenges that may arise when performance is evaluated. Performance reviews should help everyone fulfill their role better.

*The observations shared here come from 50 years of meeting with elderships and church committees, a dozen years in the university, and 16 years of service on a non-profit board (six years as chairman of the board).