

HOW TO HOLD A PUBLIC MEETING AND GET OUT WITH YOUR SKIN

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Do you ever feel sorry for the person who gets stuck holding public meetings? You know the one ... the PTA president who's required to "visit" with tax payers after property taxes go up by 30%...the plant supervisor facing 300 employees who are about to lose their jobs...the deacon who has to ask church members to pay for a new roof on the sanctuary... the engineer trying desperately to convince residents that a toxic waste disposal site in their neighborhood is really in their best interest.

Whether you're a government official, a union organizer, a sales manager, a business owner or a Boy Scout volunteer, if you lead people then sometime in your life you're going to be responsible for conducting a public meeting. Believe me, managing a large group can be frightening. If you do it right, the planning and organizing process will take lots of time, but the results will be worth the work.

This article was written to share some few tips that can make the experience of leading a public meeting less intimidating and more successful. After 20 years of managing group discussions and large public meetings, I think I've made every mistake possible. Let me show you the scars. You trust these suggestions.

Early in the planning process, establish clear, written outcomes for the meeting

You're going to invest significant time and resources to plan and facilitate a public meeting, and by inviting others to the meeting you're asking them to invest their time, too. Honor that investment by answering the following questions: "What do you want to achieve from the meeting, and what do you really need to achieve?"

When you send the initial meeting notice to participants let them know how they should expect to benefit from their investment of time, and what result the community can expect from their efforts.

Set your expectations and objectives at manageable levels

Don't overestimate what can be accomplished at a public meeting... especially one where you anticipate lots of people and bushels of controversy. Generally, as the number of people in a meeting increases, their productivity geometrically decreases. The more conflict...the more time it takes to work through the options. A lot of work can

be done in a short time with groups of twelve or less... but once the number exceeds a dozen people, communication, coordination, and cooperation all start to decline. Set reasonable meeting goals, let people know what to expect, and keep your contract with the group.

Design the meeting with a specific process outcome in mind

This statement doesn't mean the decisions have all been made before the meeting is held. (In fact, the reason people get upset at public hearings is that they believe that everything is "cooked" before anyone enters the door.) If that's the case, cancel the meeting and do something more productive with your time. It means that different meeting designs will give you different meeting results. A meeting designed to decide specific implementation strategies for a youth gang prevention program would be quite different from one celebrating the accomplishments of that same program. The meeting location, the time of day, room arrangements, the agenda, and even the kinds of refreshments served during the meeting will all have an effect on the meeting ... shaping the ultimate outcomes. Decide what driving questions will focus the group's attention, and then establish boundaries and parameters to assure the group will stay on target to answer those questions. Look for "an" answer, and don't predetermine "the" answer.

Know when not to hold a public meeting

If you need to send a simple, non-controversial message to a large number of people, then you probably don't need to hold a public meeting. Just send them a letter. If you need to decide public policy but there is only one option, then don't waste people's time discussing what decision to make. Just make the decision. Many requests for public policy have narrow boundaries and are of little interest to the public. They may not like the answer, but since there is only one answer... move forward.

Public meetings should be reserved for times when public policy is ambiguous and civic direction fuzzy, or when strong polarity threatens to divide an otherwise homogeneous community. Sometimes there are multiple facets to the questions, so one big public meeting just won't do the trick. Consider dividing the questions that need answers into smaller pieces and assigning them to "blue ribbon" committees to study. Use the public meeting time to bring all that information back to residents in a way that makes it clear and linear. Large groups wrestling with complex public policy is a recipe for frustration.

Keep the number of participants manageable

Sometimes you just don't know how many folks will attend your public event, but unless the objective is to celebrate some incredible success, try to avoid meetings of 50 or more people. Getting consensus from large groups is difficult, at best, and impossible most of the time. Intimate conversations, by definition, don't exist in large groups. Efforts to find compromise are very hard to facilitate with mobs. In the worst cases, riots can occur. So make your meeting objectives very conservative when managing gatherings

of 50 or more people. Keep it simple. Use break-out groups to distribute the workload. Create discrete “driving questions” that can be posed to these smaller groups to increase individual participant airtime and encourage constructive, collaborative thinking.

Make public meetings opportunities for real discussions

As stated earlier, if the decision has already been made, don't waste the public's time discussing it further. (Yes, I know that sometimes you can't avoid the public hearing requirement even though direction has already been set.) Instead, redirect participants' energy to something productive like discussing optional ways the decision will be implemented. Avoid public events that both discuss and decide at the same meeting. First, have a conversation with the community so everyone is clear about the facts, conditions and options. Then, give policy makers and the public an opportunity to consider what was said before deciding what will happen. Finally, and only after sufficient time has passed, hold a meeting where policy makers can describe their individual decisions and the reasoning for their decisions.

Show the group respect and courtesy

If you must hold large meetings, don't use conventional class-room or conference seating. When experts and authorities position themselves at the front of an assembly on a raised dais, with the public gathered at their feet, they literally and figuratively put themselves “above” the group. Confrontation is almost guaranteed. Come down off that stage. Sit with the people. After introductions, allow the participants to speak first by asking them what they currently know about the topic, what common questions they might have and what is important to them. Offer refreshments... even if it's only cookies and coffee. You will be amazed at how simple respect for participants can change a potentially rowdy group meeting into productive civil discourse.

Don't underestimate the power of well-planned logistics

If you must hold large meetings, make the times and locations convenient to everyone having a stake in the discussion. Consider holding multiple, smaller meetings at different times and places so more people have access. How people are seated will affect their participation. Half-circle seating is good ... multiple round tables and smaller groups are better... simultaneous, multiple events are best of all.

Keep the process fair and open-minded and actively listen to people when they speak.

Summarize and repeat comments made by participants. You will avoid misunderstandings and at the same time show respect for the person making the comment. Provide time for all voices to be heard. Don't stack the deck to give one position an advantage over another. When time is short, encourage groups to consolidate their presentations by appointing a spokesperson to represent their interests. Toward the end of the meeting solicit positions and offer alternatives that

have yet to be stated. Encourage innovative thinking. Show the group that you're open to their suggestions. Be willing to enter into honest dialog.

Close the conversation by completing the process

Send everyone who invests their time to attend a public meeting a copy of the official notes. Make sure that your notes reflect all positions accurately... even those you may not like. Help people see that their feelings, fears and values received an honest airing and full consideration. If the meeting was to simply discuss and identify options, let your notes reflect that outcome. If the meeting was held to decide policy, then the meeting should be clear as to the decision, and reasoning behind the decision.

Make people accountable for civility

Prior to the beginning of the meeting, distribute a written list of meeting rules under which the group will operate. Give participants time to read these rules of engagement. As the meeting begins, review the rules verbally. Explain that the rules are there to advance the group's agenda, encourage broad participation and open the conversation to everyone.

During the meeting, enforce the rules uniformly and without malice. If individuals violate the rules, call a "time out" and bring the infraction to the group's attention. If it was an unintentional error, keep your comments light, but don't be afraid to recess the meeting temporarily if continuous or intentional violations of the rules occur. As a last resort, you have the authority to adjourn the meeting.

If the group stays within the rules of engagement and completes the agenda with positive results, at the end of the meeting compliment them on their success.

Summary:

The work of policy-making bodies would probably be more efficient if conducted behind closed doors in small groups, but our traditions encourage (and state open meeting laws require) public hearings and meetings be part of the job. The first time you're responsible for conducting a public meeting it may not feel so good, but with time, experience and good meeting preparation you will become an expert.

The bad news for policy makers is that you were probably neither groomed nor educated for conducting public meetings. The good news is, you will be delightfully surprised at how helpful community meetings can be if you take the time to carefully plan and respectfully conduct them.

And who said public policy making was supposed to be efficient, anyway???