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Chapter 1

Meeting and School Communications

Remove one of the greatest sources of frustration—the number of meetings—and improve effectiveness!

The increased time commitment of all members of a school's staff, with the associated increase in stress, means schools must look at their work practices. Most schools will find that their existing practices reflect a time prior to recent changes in education. One of the major causes of frustration and complaints in schools is the number of meetings and their lack of effectiveness. An efficient and effective solution must be found.

This chapter is not about how to conduct better meetings. Rather, it is about going to the heart of the problem: the meetings structure within your school. Conducting effective meetings is certainly vital, but only after the system of meetings has been restructured. The system of meetings needs to reflect the best use of available time, staff and other resources.

Walk into any school to look at the planner on the noticeboard. You will find that there are meetings listed for almost every Monday to Thursday afternoon of every week. There will often also be lunchtime meetings. Add to this the common practice of morning briefings and it is little surprise that meetings are such a source of frustration.

Meetings are an important part of both a school's and an individual's development. They are a medium through which to share knowledge and to facilitate participatory decision-making.

Meetings are held for a variety of reasons. Some of these are:

- to disseminate information
- to gather information
- to discuss issues
- to reach a decision

These are excellent reasons for meetings and if meetings achieve these goals, the participants and the school benefit from it. However, with the current meeting structure in most schools, we seldom achieve these goals.

Most meetings are scheduled to run on a regular basis. These may be staff meetings, faculty meetings, curriculum committee meetings, advisory committee meetings, year level meetings, or sub school meetings. How often in your school are these regular meetings cancelled—often due to the lack of a quorum or lack of issues to be discussed?

In a recent survey of teachers conducted by the Australian Education Professional Development Network, teachers were asked to respond to three questions:

1. Please list the words that come to mind when you hear the word 'meeting';
2. Please list the things that you find frustrating about meetings;
3. Please list the ways that meetings in your school would be improved for you.

A summary of the responses:

1. Please list the words that come to mind when you hear the word 'meeting'.

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • not again | • useful | • sometimes waste of time |
| • boring | • could be doing better things | • fun |
| • unproductive | • informative | • start late |
| • opportunity for communication | • sharing | • pressure |
| • leadership | • tired | • professional development |
| • too many | | • too often |

This summary of positive and negative feelings is in proportion to the responses received. The summary of responses reflects both positive and negative feelings that people have about meetings. It tells us that people recognise the value of effective meetings. It also tells us that people recognise the frustrations caused by ineffective meetings.

2. Please list the things that you find frustrating about meetings.

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| • some meetings don't achieve anything | • compulsory attendance | • meetings for meetings sake |
| • lack of clear agenda | • wrong time of the day | • not optimum size |
| • irrelevance | • insufficient time to respond | • people dominating |
| • not starting on time | • issues can be dealt with other ways apart from a meeting | • regularity |
| • lack of time to prepare | • meeting for the sake of it | • discussions that go away from the issue at hand |
| • always at the end of the day when teachers are tired | | • no closure |
| • people who can't run a meeting | | • lack of relevance |

Are you nodding your head in agreement?

Do you feel similar frustrations?

3. Please list the ways that meetings in your school would be improved for you.

What can we learn from the cancellation of meetings or the lack of interest in them?

We can learn to restructure our system of meetings!

The survey results suggest that staff value a meeting when it achieves the goals that have been

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • time release during working hours • no clashes • some meetings are good when we work on projects • fewer in number, more on content & relevance • refreshments • specific purpose • clear action summary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • only when needed • clear agenda & outcome goal • fewer • more information shared by other methods • action research model • agenda distributed beforehand • practical material to discuss • more quality time for them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicit goals • time limits enforced • more people taking on tasks • breakfast meetings—fresher • outcomes listed & followed • having equal chance to participate • start & finish on time • look at the whole picture of commitments |
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set. The results also suggest that there should be a more creative approach to the meeting structure in schools. There is ample evidence that staff require training in how to conduct and contribute to effective meetings.

However, the answer is not to simply do away with some meetings. Nor is it simply to train staff in effective meeting skills, although this is important. It requires a more strategic approach to determine an improved meeting structure to address the concerns of staff and to meet the needs of the school as an organisation.

The Proposal

Most schools need to review the current structure and function of the staff meeting, referred to in some schools as the principal's meeting, to make it a more productive and valuable meeting for all participants. Rather than being meetings where the whole staff sits and listens to information, they should be used creatively. Schools might invite guest speakers to talk about issues of concern, or break the staff into small groups to discuss a range of topics or to generate ideas. To address the concerns identified by staff and to ensure that their needs are met, schools should abandon all other regular meetings, apart from these staff meetings and establish a School Leadership Team. Staff meetings should also be used to determine issues to be referred to the Leadership Team and to receive reports and recommendations from the Leadership Team.

The Leadership Team would meet weekly to address directions for the school in all areas and discuss issues that are currently addressed in the many other meetings. It would generally meet openly and consult frequently with staff at staff meetings and through written communication. When issues arise that require detailed investigation, Specific Work Action Teams (SWAT) would be formed. The Leadership Team would announce their findings to the staff, and make recommendations to the staff for acceptance. These SWAT teams would be formed to address a specific issue and would disband once their task is complete. They would report their findings to the Leadership Team. All staff would be expected to serve on at least one SWAT team in any one year.

This structure simplifies and rationalises the number of decision-making bodies in the school, while at the same time giving all staff members a greater input into the school decision-making process.

As the Leadership Team would be meeting weekly throughout the year, resources should be provided for them. The major resource is time. At least one period per week should be allocated for these meetings. Leadership Team meetings could be held during the last period of the day and continue to an agreed time after school. This period should be counted as a part of the