

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

## ARRANGING AN AGENDA: AN ACTIVITY ON RUNNING BETTER MEETINGS

Joseph Seltzer, La Salle University

### ABSTRACT

An experiential exercise was designed to encourage discussion of how to set an agenda and run a meeting. Instructions for running the activity are provided.

### INTRODUCTION

Many people complain about poorly run meetings. A major suggestion to improve the quality of meetings is that care be paid to the agenda. In presenting this material in both classrooms and training programs, I have felt the need for practical examples. The following activity was developed to stimulate discussion and supplement my lecture. This version has worked well in both MBA classes and in work with non-profit organizations, although the items could be rewritten to reflect other types of organizations if desired.

#### Overview of the Activity

This activity was designed to increase the participants' understanding of the considerations in developing a meeting agenda and to stimulate discussion of the problems of setting an agenda and running a meeting. It can be done with between 6 and 40 individuals in about 40-60 minutes, possibly longer if there are a large number of participants. The instructor will need a blackboard and chalk or newsprint and markers and a copy of the sheet "Arranging an Agenda Activity" (Appendix I) for each participant. It is important to have a room large enough for people to interact comfortably in small groups.

#### Process

- 1) Introductory lecture on setting an agenda and running meetings. See Whetten and Cameron (1984:449-481) for a good overview of the ideas and concepts to cover (ten minutes).
- 2) Distribute the handout "Arranging an Agenda Activity" (see Appendix I) to each participant and ask them to "number the items in the order they should appear on the agenda." Note that it is likely that not all the items will be on the agenda. Also ask the participants to indicate if the chosen items were for information, for discussion, or for decision (five minutes).
- 3) Form small groups (3-5 people unless the class is very large) and ask them to compare answers and discuss (ten to fifteen minutes).  
(Note: to save time, this step can be eliminated.)
- 4) List the nine items on a blackboard or flipchart. Ask how many people had the first item (announcement about funding) on their agenda. Record the responses and discuss if the item was appropriate. Appendix II provides a

suggested solution and can be used as an instructor's guide. An alternative would be to photocopy and distribute the solution, but the exercise was designed to encourage discussion. I think that it works better if the instructor tries to contrast different student rationales. Continue the same process with each item (ten to fifteen minutes).

- 5) Ask people which item they had first and record the responses. Go over each item that was mentioned and discuss if it should be first or if it would create problems with other items that need to be accomplished (see Appendix II). Continue the discussion of any other points of interest (five to fifteen minutes).

### APPENDIX I

#### ARRANGING AN AGENDA ACTIVITY

Lee Howard is the executive director of Associated Child Services; a medium sized human service agency. There is a staff of 27 operating a number of programs in three locations, including a home for battered women. Each facility has a "division manager." It is 8:00 AM on a Monday morning, and Lee has come to the office early to get some work done. The first thing Lee has to do is to prepare the agenda for the monthly full staff meeting on Thursday. It is scheduled from 9:00 AM until 10:30 AM, at which time Lee has to leave to drive to an appointment with the Chairman of the Board.

USING THE LIST OF ITEMS BELOW, PREPARE AN AGENDA FOR THE MEETING. NUMBER THE ITEMS IN THE ORDER THEY SHOULD APPEAR ON THE AGENDA. INDICATE IF THE ITEM IS FOR INFORMATION, FOR DISCUSSION OR FOR DECISION.

\_\_\_ a) There are two announcements that Lee wanted to make about future funding opportunities to see if other people were interested in pursuing the ideas.

\_\_\_ b) The agency has just received a donation of a photocopy machine. Lee has to decide where to put it. People from each location would probably like it in their building.

\_\_\_ c) Three people have been studying the new state legislation on foster care programs for several months and have indicated that they are ready to report to the group.

\_\_\_ d) The long running dispute between two division managers seems to have boiled over again. Lee is considering bringing up the issues at the meeting (including budget limitations on both, requests for transfers between offices, referrals to outside agencies rather than the other location when clients live outside the service area, etc.).

## Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

\_\_\_\_ e) The phone bills over the past two months have gotten alarmingly high.

\_\_\_\_ f) The emergency situation last week involving Larry Jones caused Lee to think hard about individuals' responsibilities involving sick children. It all started when Larry Jones (age 6) fell and broke his arm. Five different people were involved in getting him to the doctor's office and getting treatment. About an hour later, Larry Jones began to get very sick and his mother was unable to comfort him. The remaining staff person in the home was not able to leave. Two hours later, the division manager returned and realized that Larry was quite ill and had him taken to the hospital. He had appendicitis, but is now recovering. Lee's concern was that 5 people had left the house to deal with the rather routine problem of Larry.

\_\_\_\_ g) The organization's major fundraiser is about 6 weeks away. The volunteers seem to be handling it quite well, but you wanted to remind the staff that they might be called on to become more involved or even to handle parts of the event.

\_\_\_\_ h) A major funder just sent a large report on a new funding thrust and requested that the Associated Child Services and other organizations bid on providing a particular, specialized training program. Since the agency has been thinking about developing a similar program, this is a terrific opportunity. People were excited last Friday when Lee told them about it. Lee wants to follow up as soon as possible.

\_\_\_\_ i) Two new people were hired since the last full staff meeting and Lee wants to introduce them.

\_\_\_\_ j) One of the neighbors stopped Lee on the street last week to complain about the noise level. This is not the first time there has been a complaint.

### APPENDIX II SUGGESTED ANSWERS FOR "ARRANGING AN AGENDA ACTIVITY"

Several general statements need to be made about this meeting. First, too many people will be in attendance for the group to effectively make decisions. With 27 people present, the best use of the meeting is to present information. Discussion is possible on a few items, but will take a considerable amount of time if all persons are to speak. A second consideration is if agenda items will unify or divide the group. Given the limited amount of time, some items should be avoided that are likely to create controversy and that will probably not be resolved during this monthly meeting. Third, the order of the items on the agenda is important because some items might take so much time that other later items will not be addressed. Brief informational items can be put near the beginning or end of the agenda (especially, based on past meetings of the group, if you expect to stick to the times on the agenda).

a) POSSIBLY ON AGENDA - This is an announcement that can be made during the meeting or in writing. It is preferable to put this at the end of the meeting, so that people do not get involved in a long discussion of this relatively minor item.

b) NOT ON AGENDA - This item is likely to cause much controversy with little chance of reasonable resolution. It should be decided by Lee or in a meeting of the three division managers rather than in the full staff meeting.

c) POSSIBLY ON AGENDA - It is important to give people a chance to present a report that has taken much time and effort to prepare. On the other hand, if the presentation will take longer than the limited time available in this particular meeting, it can be held for a future session. Lee might still want to include the item in the agenda to briefly recognize the individuals for their effort.

d) NOT ON AGENDA - This issue relates to only two of the three locations. Further, it is emotionally charged and will require substantial time. Lee cannot afford to raise the issue when he/she has to leave at a fixed time. It might be more reasonable to call the division managers and set a time for a separate meeting. Possibly Lee will want to have a meeting of the staffs of the two locations and may use the full staff meeting to set a time.

e) NOT ON AGENDA - This issue should only be included if a new policy about phone usage is to be announced or if Lee wants to give people information about the bills and ask them to monitor their calls more closely. People may become defensive if given too much time to talk about this issue. It should be at the end so that it does not create a long discussion.

f) NOT ON AGENDA - The problem relates only to one facility and might be best addressed with the division manager. If there is a new policy or if Lee feels the need to restate the existing policy, it can be included in this meeting.

g) ON AGENDA - This is an announcement and can come near the end of the meeting.

h) ON AGENDA - Since Lee has already announced the opportunity, the only need is to answer questions and schedule a follow-up meeting for people who are interested.

i) ON AGENDA - This should be the first item and can be brief.

j) NOT ON AGENDA - This issue should be addressed by the division manager.

### REFERENCES

Whetten, David A., and Cameron, Kim S. (1984), Developing Management Skills, Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company.