

It's more than the spelling

Before I retired to Maine I worked in engineering, research and management. I worked for industrial corporations, government, and nonprofit organizations. I served on committees and boards of directors. And I took part in an awful lot of meetings.

Running a meeting is an art and a huge, often overlooked responsibility: the people at meetings are a precious resource, a pool of talent, a source of creative energy. Or they could be dead wood, struggling to keep awake, doodling little graffiti on the margins of handout pages. Sitting in meetings –and especially leading them – we often overlook this important fact, and get lost in procedure and detail instead.

One of my former bosses ran the best meetings I have ever been part of. He would begin by reminding everyone that our job was to keep him straight and honest. He invited us to disagree, question and propose alternatives to his ideas. He viewed leading a meeting as “managing our people-resource”. His meetings were a stimulating, interesting and creative time. We all looked forward to them and, when they ended, we had a sense of having been enriched by the personal interactions, no matter the subject under discussion.

In contrast, the worst meetings for me have been those heavy with procedures – references to policy manuals, Roberts’ rules and such. There would be plenty of motions and seconds and voting over minutiae, duly recorded by the hapless person assigned to take notes, to be converted later to the Minutes, to be approved the next time we met. We usually did– but few, if any, ever read them. In these meetings every subject seemed to have the same weight – be it next year’s annual budget, or who would prepare the name-tags for an upcoming seminar. The relative importance of issues vanished from consideration – they were all reduced to characterless chores to get over dealing with as quickly as possible. The room tended to feel as if everyone was wearing a straight-jacket – in a way we all were. We would only have perfunctory “discussions” after a motion was made and seconded, taking turns, always addressing the chair – never spontaneously addressing each-another. Worse, I sat on that board for two years, never getting to know much about my fellow directors.

The seniors serving as directors of Maine’s senior colleges are a precious lot. People with professional skills, know-how, talent and life experience – not to mention dedication, character, personality and a sense of humor. If and when it is your turn to chair such a meeting, beware of this: The difference between a dynamic, effective meeting of the board and a spirit-deadening meeting of the bored is more than a matter of spelling.

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