



Improving the Staff Conference

Gerald R. McKay

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

How often have you heard the comment, "Well, that staff meeting was certainly a waste of time?" All too often this comment has been made by county agents, ag teachers, extension specialists, and many others in both public and private organizations. In true democratic fashion, these folks spend untold hours in conferences.

Why would either a regular weekly staff conference or special meeting called for some hurry-up decisions be labeled a time-waster? Very likely the meeting was not efficient in use of time, didn't reach the objectives it should have, or for some reason, staff members didn't take part in a democratic way.

In any case, if you are responsible for a conference, you can do something to make it a "time-saver" instead of a "time-waster."

WHAT ARE YOUR OBJECTIVES?

Let's first consider what objectives your particular conference should achieve. Generally, such meetings should provide an opportunity for staff members to:

- Keep in touch with each other and with their administration so "the right hand knows what the left hand is doing." It should spot duplication of activities and help coordinate programs.
- Learn about future plans of the organization.
- Help develop policies and objectives and assist in planning operating procedures.
- Suggest answers to current problems through brainstorming techniques.
- Evaluate various solutions to problems that are presented.
- Express grievances and bring up new problems.
- Keep administrators posted on status of progress and personnel reactions.

Staff conferences that meet at least some of these objectives are not a waste of time. Participants look forward to them as a source of renewed enthusiasm in a program which every member calls his own.

PLANNING THE CONFERENCE

Usually an administrator or someone from his office calls staff conferences. It's a good idea to ask one person to be responsible for planning and conducting each meeting. He may get others to help and may sometimes shift the responsibility so others will have experience in leadership and so there will be a variety in meeting techniques. The leader must have a genuine conviction in the right and desire of people to share in the destiny of their group. Otherwise the conference will be conducted in an artificial atmosphere.

BEFOREHAND. . .

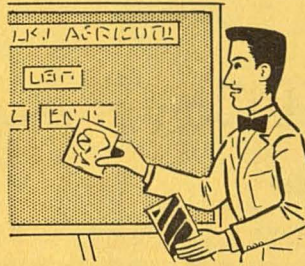
If your conference is to be a time-saver, do these things before it begins:

1. ✓ Set date and hour as many weeks in advance as possible and be sure to notify staff members.
2. ✓ Set the closing as well as the starting time for each conference to permit staff members to make other appointments later in the day and to enable them to keep commitments already made. This will require budgeting the meeting time according to an agenda.
3. ✓ Plan the agenda in advance and send all participants a copy of it. Don't include the items which concern only yourself and one or two other people. Discuss these items privately.
4. ✓ Get information you'll need at the meeting



before hand. You may need such items as cost of certain projects, dates of holidays, vacation schedules, maps, community meeting dates, or perhaps a copy of last year's budget.

5. Arrange to have a chalkboard or newsprint pad for presenting figures or showing plans. A flannelboard might be useful, too.



6. Have a screen and projector ready for showing 2x2 slides and be sure windows can be darkened.

7. Be sure the room has adequate ventilation, comfortable temperature, and space for everyone (at a table if possible) where each can see the others. Get a room that's appropriate to the size of your group.



8. Have someone outside the group take telephone calls and meet visitors so no one has to be called out except for emergencies.

9. Make assignments for individual reports far enough in advance to allow individuals time for preparation. Check on their progress a day or two before your meeting.

10. If you've invited a guest speaker or consultant, be sure to brief him on background of the group before your meeting begins. Let him know how his presentation fits into the agenda.

AT THE MEETING. . .

Having called your conference, you can do these things to make it a time-saver:

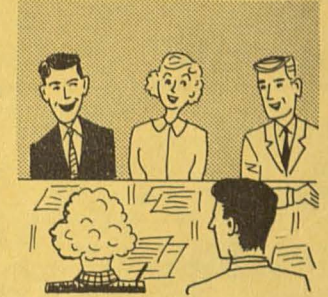
- Begin on time.
- Get off to a good start by quickly reviewing the agenda and suggesting a distribution of time that will let all items be considered and still adjourn on time.

- Have someone make a record of pertinent decisions and assignments.



- Make available a copy of the minutes of your last meeting. It is usually not necessary to read a detailed record unless someone requests it or raises questions.

- See that everyone has a opportunity to talk if he wishes. By the same token, keep anyone from monopolizing the discussion.



- Keep the discussion within limits of your agenda. If it gets into an area of interest to only one person, postpone that part of it.

- Summarize the discussion frequently and note progress that the group has made.



- If the discussion gets too heated, ask one of the participants to look up further information and report back at the next meeting.

- Maintain an attitude of tolerance for those who express minority views on particular subjects.
- Set the time for your next meeting and explain any preparation needed for it.

- Close the conference at the time indicated when you started.
- Send written summaries with specific assignments to each participant after the meeting.

If you've followed most of the suggestions in these check lists, chances are no one can say your conference was a waste of time. Instead it will have saved time for your staff by making them more efficient, helping avoid duplication of effort, and improving the morale of everyone.