Tip Sheet 2

Planning and Agenda Design

It has been said that "*Failing to plan is like planning to fail.*" Most problems in meetings can be prevented by good planning. This tip sheet in the meeting effectiveness series offers ideas and checklists for planning a meeting.

There are five "Ws" to consider when planning a meeting:

1. The Why
2. The What
3. The Who
4. The When
5. The Where

1. The Why

When planning a meeting, first consider its purpose. Having a clearly defined purpose makes it more likely that a meeting will achieve its intended outcomes. Here are the types of questions to consider when planning a meeting:

- Why is this meeting needed?
- What outcomes or decisions should this meeting generate?
- Given the costs of this meeting, what can be done to maximize the return on this investment (ROI)?
- Is this meeting essential, or could the desired results be achieved by e-mails or teleconference call? If so, should the meeting be canceled?

2. The What

The second ingredient of planning a good meeting is a logical and well-structured agenda. With such an agenda, issues will be allotted time in proportion to their importance and the group's readiness to undertake quality discussion and decision-making. Agenda items with low impact on the group's mandate or those that can be classified as "minutiae" should be dropped altogether.

Often the agenda will be designed for your group by a staff member, but your group should still provide input. Here are key agenda design issues:

- Scope of the agenda: A crammed agenda can make the meeting feel rushed and shortchange discussion. A skimpy agenda may not deliver substantial returns on the investment in the meeting. This means that you need to prioritize and schedule only as many items as can be comfortably addressed within the available time.

- Nature of agenda items: The agenda should clearly indicate whether each item is:
    - For information only
    - For discussion
    - For decision-making (in which case decision-making options should be defined and communicated to members before the meeting)

- Sequence of agenda items: Items that require concentration and energy should be scheduled early. Substantial items should be followed by lighter items to provide a "mental breather."

- Significant agenda items should be linked to the group's mandate and work plan in some way (see Tip Sheet 1)

- It is a good idea to estimate and allocate the amount of time needed for major agenda items. This will help you monitor progress and advise the members whether they are ahead of schedule or need to move forward: "We have about five minutes left for this item. Does anyone have anything new to add, and – if not – shall we move on?"

- Last-minute agenda items (otherwise known as "green bananas" which may not be ripe for informed discussion) should be the exception and not the norm, as they often surprise members and cause anxiety and frustration. Most items should be included in the pre-circulated agenda, along with related reports and other supporting documents.

- Agendas (and supporting documents) should be distributed at least two to three days prior to the meeting to allow group members to become familiar with the issues and know what to expect at the meeting.

- Pre-circulated reports should be written clearly and concisely so they are easy to read and comprehend. If a report is very technical, it may help to include a list of technical terms and acronyms. These steps will make it easy for members to prepare and will lead to more productive discussions.

3. The Who

The third ingredient of planning an effective meeting is deciding who should be invited to attend and participate. Having the right people (together with their knowledge) promotes quality discussions and good outcomes. Invited participants generally include the following:

- Decision makers (voting group members)

- Ex officio members

- Designated management and/or staff liaisons who can provide operational and administrative knowledge and experience, and thereby help make any decisions more realistic and sustainable

- If needed and feasible, individuals whose knowledge or expertise can add to the quality of the discussions and the decisions made.

It is suggested that you communicate your expectations to attendees prior to the meeting, to ensure that their participation is productive, and to reduce the likelihood of wasted time. These expectations may include the following:

- How they are expected to prepare for the meeting

- What (if any) lead roles they will assume, such as making a presentation, facilitating a discussion on a given topic, etc.

- How much time is allotted for presentations or other lead roles (e.g., 10 minutes for a presentation, followed by 5 minutes for questions from the group)

4. The When

The fourth ingredient of planning a meeting is the choice of time, which should be done after consultation with the members. Here are a few tips:

- Select start and end times that will make the entire meeting possible and convenient for as many participants as possible to attend.

- Plan to start on time and inform the participants that you'll do that. And do it.

- Schedule a start time that will allow enough time for those who attend other meetings to arrive at your meeting without having to rush. Try to avoid forcing participants to attend back-to-back meetings.

5. The Where

The fifth ingredient of planning a meeting is choosing the location and looking after logistical details. Consider these tips:

- Choose a convenient and accessible location.

- Choose optimal room size and configuration. For a small group, a U-shape configuration may be preferable. For a larger group, round tables or classroom style may be more feasible.

- Pre-test audio-visual aids to reduce the likelihood of embarrassing and time-consuming failures.

- Address other logistical issues, such as catering, noise reduction, temperature, etc.

In Closing

Planning a meeting is a large and time-consuming task. Do it well and you will increase the likelihood that your meetings will run well and that members will not be unnecessarily distracted or annoyed. With good planning, you should now be ready to chair the meeting with clarity and confidence (see Tip Sheet 3).