Leading meetings is an important management tool for solving problems, making decisions, finding new ideas, building team spirit, and developing staff effectiveness and self-confidence. There are four types of meetings. Staff meetings include reporting of facts by staff members to the manager and information giving by the manager to the staff members. In problem-solving or decision-making meetings, the group uses facts and ideas to solve problems and make decisions. A combination meeting contains some elements of problem solving and some reporting or information giving. Finally, in creative meetings, the group develops new ideas relating to a theme or issue.

Staff Meetings With No Problem Solving or Decision Making

In staff meetings, therapists report on performance in their areas. If such reporting is not more frequent than once a month, it can motivate therapists to do development work in preparation for the report. Following the reports, the manager gives information about organizational decisions, new activities in the organization, new policies and rules, or future trends and developments. The manager indicates how the information will affect the staff.

Staff members and the manager have different goals in mind when they think of staff meetings (Lobingier, 1969). Staff members want to report on their performance and be recognized for their ability. They want to learn about what is happening in the organization and to see themselves in the overall corporate picture. Finally, they want to foresee problems and opportunities.

The manager wants to obtain information from reports to stay on top of developments in the department. The manager wants to make sure organizational information is understood and to persuade the therapists of its importance. The manager wants to motivate staff members and encourage staff development.

Problem-Solving or Decision-Making Meetings

In a problem-solving meeting, the leader needs to have a fair amount of control in order to keep the meeting focused. Attendance at these meetings should be limited to the least number of staff members who can give comprehensive viewpoints.

Combination Meetings

A combination meeting contains some reporting, some problem solving, and some decision making. Many staff meetings may be combination meetings. As English (1984) notes:

Such meetings can become problems if the leader does not make smooth transitions from one component to the other, so that everyone is aware of the conditions under which they
are operating. For example, while a report is being given, one of the staff may ask a question. The question brings up two problems, which then generate a heated discussion, after which the manager makes a quick decision. Such precipitous decision making could be avoided if the manager were prepared for a transition from a reporting meeting to a problem-solving meeting. (p. 117)

Creative Meetings

The leader of a creative meeting should exert little control. Brainstorming is important. The leader's job is to clarify and use comparisons, examples, restatements, and summaries to keep the meeting moving. The leader must demonstrate a positive attitude about the possibility of the group's finding excellent new ideas. Attendance can be open to a large number of participants.

Alternatives to Holding Meetings

Meetings may not be the most appropriate way to attain specific objectives. One-to-one meetings, phone communication, or memos might be used to better advantage. Memos have the advantage of being permanent records, and they can save time and money. However, if the issue is complex, face-to-face communication assumes that meanings are understood.

A meeting is useful when the manager needs advice or help with solving a problem and a group would stimulate better ideas than the manager could generate alone. A meeting is also appropriate when there are concerns to share with the staff as a whole, or when the staff itself wants a meeting. A meeting is useful when there is a problem that involves people from different groups or when the nature of a problem is unclear.

A meeting is not appropriate for dealing with personnel issues or dealing with an issue that could be communicated as well by telephone or memo or in a one-to-one discussion. A meeting is inappropriate when the manager's mind is already made up about an issue, when the subject is trivial, when there has been inadequate preparation, or when anger and hostility in the group is such that people need time to calm down before they can begin to work collaboratively (Doyle & Straus, 1976).

Various Leadership Styles

Every leader of meetings uses a management style. This style can considerably influence the outcome of the meeting and the department in general; since it affects the attitudes and motivation of staff members. The several ways of conceptualizing leadership can be spread along a continuum that varies from a highly autocratic leadership style to a noncontrolling leadership style.

Autocratic Style

The autocratic manager makes decisions and later tells the staff members, who are given no opportunity for input. The disadvantage of this approach is that the therapists who are independent will rebel or resign. The therapists who remain will be conformists. In addition, such a manager is not developing leaders, since this manager wants to be the only leader. The manager gives close supervision, but when he or she is absent, the therapists have difficulty functioning. Finally, since there is little feedback from the therapists, the manager's decisions are made in a vacuum. This style works fairly well with nonprofessionals and submissive personalities, or in an emergency situation.

Manipulative Style

The manipulative manager is similar to the autocrat, except that this manager tries to hide autocracy by persuading the staff member that his or her decisions are good ones. Bargains, maneuvers, and manipulation are techniques often used, pitting staff members against each other or using group pressure. Staff members learn that even when they are asked for opinions, those opinions will not affect the decisions that are made. The manipulative style has the same problems as the autocratic style, with the added disadvantage that the manipulative style can never be useful because it is deceptive.

Give-and-Take Style

The give-and-take manager is essentially autocratic but not as controlling. This type of manager asks for questions and discussion after decisions are made. The advantage of this style is that the staff develops a better understanding of the decisions and their ramifications than do the staffs of the autocrat and the manipulator. But the staff members still tend to be passive people who have a great need for security. Leaders are not developed.

Tentative Consultation Style

The tentative manager identifies a problem, thinks of several solutions, and then asks the staff to consider the problem and the proposed solutions. Although looking for new ideas, the manager makes it clear to the staff that she or he will make the final decision. The problem with this style is that the tentative manager rarely hears any new ideas. The staff learns that it is much easier to accept the manager's ideas than to work at finding new ideas, which will probably be rejected. This staff also consists largely of passive personalities.

Consultation Style

The consultative manager is the first manager on the continuum to show any bravery. This manager iden-
ifies the problem and presents it to the staff without giving any tentative solutions (although he or she certainly may have thought of some). The staff develops several possible solutions, and the consultative manager selects either the one that he or she considers best or chooses one of his or her own solutions. The staff is filling the role of consultant by exploring ideas without taking responsibility for making decisions. These staff members are more independent, although they still require frequent positive reinforcement and assistance from the manager, since they do not have confidence in their decision-making abilities.

**Participative Management Style I**

Participative Manager I is the first on the continuum to allow staff to make some decisions. This type of manager may or may not assist the group in making decisions. Before the group begins the decision-making process, the participative manager defines the problem and the limits for the final decision.

**Participative Management Style II**

Although it is impossible to give subordinates full freedom to make decisions in a business organization, this manager gives the staff as much freedom as possible. Sometimes the staff is asked to identify and diagnose a problem, develop alternative solutions, and make a decision. The guidelines for decision making are broad and are set by the higher administration. The manager is available to assist in the decision-making process and in implementing an action. (Reality limits the practicality of this approach, due to time constraints.)

**Appropriate Use of Leadership Styles**

No one style is appropriate for all situations and all meetings. Most staff meetings will be run either in a fairly autocratic way or with a give-and-take style. Creative meetings, by their very nature, will be run in a participative style. It is in the area of problem-solving and decision-making meetings that the manager has the most leeway. Although it would appear that the styles that allow the most two-way communication and participation are the most effective for solving problems and making decisions, many factors influence the leadership style of the manager in the realm of decision making. These factors include the manager’s own habits and inclinations, differences in the needs and personalities of staff members, the skills and inclinations of staff members, the demands of the situation, and time pressures (English, 1984).

Some managers are concerned that they will lose control if they allow staff members to participate in decision making. Such managers should make a standing rule that if they do not feel comfortable in supporting the group’s decision, the decision will not be adopted. In order to retain some control, all managers must initially set the limits for the group decision making.

Neither participative management style would be appropriate for all staff members or for all decisions. Both styles require a manager who is willing to share power with the staff and who has great confidence in them. Such a manager will delegate frequently and skillfully, giving only general supervision. This person will manage by exception—that is, only the exceptional problems and situations are brought to the manager’s attention. The staff handles everything else routinely.

Both participative management styles have a major disadvantage and several advantages (English, 1984). The disadvantage is the large amount of staff time that may be used. However, implementation of the decision is generally quick, since the group is fully supportive. In the long run, productivity may be raised rather than lowered. For example, a study of comparable Japanese and American companies found that companies managed by participative management techniques had significantly higher productivity (Doyle & Straus, 1976).

The main advantage of the participative style of leadership is the development of staff members with strong, self-confident personalities, because the opportunities are great to assume responsibility and to achieve. In addition, the manager is in a “winning” position, no matter what results from participative decision making. If the group reaches an agreement, it will be inclined to support implementation of the decision, so the manager’s job is made easier. If they do not agree, the manager makes the final decision but now has had the benefit of the group’s input. In addition, since the group was deeply involved in the process, its support for the manager’s decision will probably be stronger than if a participative decision-making process had not been used.

The participative management style of decision making is also called consensual. Consensus differs from compromise (negotiation) as a method of making decisions.

Consensus allows everyone to win. Compromise implies that only a few have won—or that the solution only partially meets everyone’s needs. Compromise solutions are often reached by majority rule. Group members lobby for their positions. In order to gain votes, members often take more extreme positions than they actually believe in. By contrast, voting is not done when a group is working for consensus. Members can therefore take realistic positions from the beginning (English, 1984, pp. 106–107).

There are specific ways to facilitate group consensus (English, 1984).

1. No formal voting occurs in consensual decision making. However, everyone must be convinced that
he or she can wholeheartedly support the decision before a consensus can be declared.

2. Avoid rushing a consensus. If no firm deadline exists, use the extra time to get more information and to allow members the opportunity for creative thought.

3. Hold separate meetings for development of alternatives and for decision making. The period between the two types of meetings gives time for creative thought.

4. Involve all points of view and encourage participants to express differences of opinion. This approach will help avoid misunderstandings and hurt feelings after the decision is made.

5. Instruct group members to think in "win-win" terms instead of in "win-lose" terms. That is, the members need to find solutions that allow everyone to win, rather than solutions that allow some to win but force some to lose.

6. Instruct members not to support a solution just to avoid conflict and save time. Be suspicious if agreement is reached too quickly or too easily. Have members discuss their reasons for supporting the solution; the reasons should be similar or complementary.

7. Do not use conflict-reducing techniques such as voting or bargaining.

Conducting Problem-Solving Meetings

After choosing an appropriate leadership style, the leader works through the steps involved in conducting a participatory problem-solving meeting.

Planning

First, the leader should decide on the meeting objectives. To do this, imagine how the meeting would conclude if it were effective. Think about "what problems would have been solved, what decisions would have been made, and what ideas would have been shared" (English, 1984, p. 115). When writing the meeting objectives, make them specific so that it will be evident to all participants when the meeting has met the objective. For instance, the objective "To discuss the development of the Stroke Program" is so general that the group will never know it has finished. However, if the objective states, "To develop a needs assessment for the Stroke Program," the meeting objective will have been met when the assessment is completed.

Once the objectives are written, the manager makes a problem statement, considering several criteria (Jorgensen, Scheier, & Fautsko, 1981). First, is this really the problem? There may be other issues that run deeper and are actually more of a problem. Is the problem negatively affecting most of the people in the department? Can the problem be clearly defined? Will the right people be present at the meeting to deal with the problem effectively?

The next planning step is to make the agenda. The manager makes the agenda, assigns priority to the items, and publishes the agenda before the meeting. In plenty of time for participants to make suggestions about additions or deletions. Multiple topics can be clustered around a theme. Theme-oriented agenda meetings are easier to run and allow the leader to invite fewer participants.

Another problem in planning a meeting is to decide who should be invited to attend. Consider four types of participants:

- People who will probably have to implement some of the action items that may result from the meeting;
- People whose approval will be required to carry out the potential action items;
- People who have official responsibility for any issues that will be discussed; and
- People who could contribute significantly.

A problem can occur when people who are affected by a group member’s attendance at the meeting are not informed ahead of time. For example, the supervisor of one of the group’s members may resent the perceived power of the group and make it difficult for that member to attend the meeting. Or a member’s peers may resent the extra work they must assume so that the member can attend the meeting. Thus, the member may feel pressured to leave the group.

To avoid such problems, think about who will be concerned with or affected by the members’ involvement, including the members’ supervisors. Discuss with these people the goals of the group, the projected amount of time involved, and the reasons the members have been selected. Such preliminary discussions will often yield valuable information about different points of view and reduce environmental resistance (Potter, 1980).

Meetings that focus on technical problems should be limited to eight participants. A small group can be informal and flexible. However, for solving a major problem, 7 to 15 participants would be a large enough group to encompass all the possible points of view. Larger groups can be divided, and membership of the subgroups rotated frequently so that the participants develop more loyalty to the large group than to the subgroup. The large group can meet periodically for reporting and for a formal adoption of the decisions made in the subgroups (Doyle & Straus, 1976).

Opening the Meeting

The manager should arrive early, make final room preparations, and greet the participants. The leader should not rush in at the last minute, appearing un-
prepared and hassled. The meeting should begin on time, no matter who is present. The meeting objectives should be restated, even though they were on the printed agenda that was sent out before the meeting. The leader can state the problems in a positive and vivid manner, painting a clear mental picture and indicating the importance of the problem and the implications of the decision that will be made. He or she should make the group believe they can solve the problem. Someone could write the problem on a flip chart, breaking it up into small pieces by considering all the ways the problem affects the organization and individual members. Then the group can decide on the logical order for dealing with these pieces. These opening remarks should be limited to 2 minutes or less (Snell, 1958).

**Conducting the Meeting**

A problem-solving meeting consists of the following six steps (Snell, 1958):

*Step 1—State the problem.*

*Step 2—How did we get to this point? Present background information, supported by facts. Make sure the presentations are complete so that the group does not rush too quickly into a solution without having all the facts. Consider how long the problem has existed, why the problem began, and what effects it is currently having.*

*Step 3—Where do we want to end up? Consider what the criteria are for a complete solution and how to know when the solution has been found.*

*Step 4—What are the possible answers? Consider what constitutes an acceptable solution, what the drawbacks are of the proposed solutions, how the solutions can be combined, and whether the solutions meet the criteria established in Step 3. Write all proposed ideas on a flip chart as they are generated. Use this as the written record of the meeting. As ideas are elaborated on, deleted, given priorities, and emphasized, this can be indicated on the flip chart. Later, a written record can be made of the meeting from the flip chart.*

*Step 5—Which is the best solution?*

*Step 6—Develop an action plan.*

By using the following techniques, the leader can run an effective problem-solving or decision-making meeting.

1. **Ask specific questions that will elicit specific ideas.** For example, instead of asking, “How do some of you feel about this problem?” ask, “What caused this problem?”

2. **Ask clarifying questions—** for example, “Here is what I understood you to have said. Let me know if I’m wrong.” Or “That’s a good idea. Tell us more.”

3. **Restate members’ comments, and restate the objective and the problem whenever discussion is getting off the track.**

4. **Summarize frequently as the meeting progresses, to keep everyone’s thoughts focused.**

5. **If the pace is lagging, examine the style of leadership being used.** If the style is either too passive or too authoritarian, the meeting pace can be affected.

6. **Set time limits on agenda items and keep to them.** For example, as the time limit is approached, state, “We have 1 hour left and we haven’t reached the midpoint in our agenda. Unless there is serious objection, I propose that, in the interest of time, we move on to item number eight” (Lobingier, 1969).

**Ending the Meeting**

If possible, the leader should arrange to be available after the end of the meeting in case a participant has something to discuss. Any important comments should also be heard.

When ending a meeting, the manager should first summarize the proceedings. For an information meeting, the summary should include what has been covered and what will be done to fill in any gaps in the information. For a problem-solving meeting, the summary states how the problem started and developed and what differences of opinion have been expressed.

For a creative meeting, the leader restates the new ideas and what action will be taken on them (Gordon, 1981).

For problem-solving meetings, a further concluding step of making an action plan is important. Once the leader summarizes the solutions, the group considers three questions (Jorgensen, Scheier, & Fautsko, 1981):

1. **What will be done?** The group makes a specific list of the actions that will be accomplished.

2. **Who will do it?** If no one will take responsibility for an action, it must be postponed or reconsidered later. No one should be “volunteered” for a job.

3. **When will it be done?** The group sets deadlines, making sure they are realistic. It notes in what order the actions will be taken and when each action should begin and end, so that the plan fits together.

Finally, a follow-up meeting is scheduled, or one participant is put in charge of follow-up.

Several days after the meeting, the leader sends out a short written summary of the meeting, detailing the meeting date and location, people present, subject matter, conclusions, and future action.

**Time Control**

Allow approximately 1 hour (or less) for information meetings and problem-solving meetings that deal with a single, relatively simple issue. For most problem-solving meetings, 1½ hours should be sufficient. No meeting should be longer than 2½ hours.

Starting the meeting on time sounds simple and...
is difficult to do. Try scheduling an important and interesting item first on the agenda to motivate participants to be on time. No matter who has arrived, begin on time. The word will soon spread that the particular leader's meetings start on time, and participants will arrive on time. If, after the meeting has been running for 10 minutes, too few people have arrived to conduct business effectively, ask the group for a decision about rescheduling the meeting (Doyle & Straus, 1976).

Dealing With Problem Participants

Silent Members

The leader should not intimidate silent members. It is better to draw them out by asking questions in their areas of expertise that relate them to the discussion. If left alone, silent members may express opinions outside the meeting, actually sabotaging decisions made in the meeting.

Aggressive Members

These members dominate the discussion, make judgmental remarks about others' contributions, and interrupt others' remarks. Such behavior intimidates the more quiet members, thus eliminating potentially valuable contributions. As the talker becomes repetitious, the leader should interrupt to ask him or her to relate statements directly to the objective or problem. The leader can ask what action is desired and by whom. If this does not work, the leader might say, "Is there anyone else who has something to say but could not get time?" or "I'd like to hear from some other members at this point" (Gordon, 1981).

Private Discussions

Members who are engaging in a private discussion, should be asked a pointed question. They could be asked to share their opinion on the problem being discussed by the group.

Conflict Between Members

The leader should intervene with humor if possible. He or she can state that both sides may be correct, depending on the viewpoint. Conflict should not be suppressed immediately, since it brings out good ideas. However, the conflict must be controlled emotionally and should not extend too long. One way to control the conflict is for the leader to say, "I see we have marked differences of opinion on this question. My hunch is that some of these differences are due to misunderstanding of what the other fellow means. Before anyone states his point, I want him to rephrase, in his own words, just what the previous speaker said. And that interpretation must be accepted as accurate by the previous speaker before we can move ahead" (Lobingier, 1969). When it is time to end the conflict, the leader can restate the problem and move the discussion on by asking someone else for input. Conflict may be entirely negative when it results from one member, who is feeling rejected or criticized, attacking another member or some aspect of the meeting in an irrelevant fashion. In this case, the leader should calmly state the facts and move on, not being drawn into a conflict.

When the entire group is polarized into two factions, there are several steps that can be used to deal with the problem (Bradford, 1976; Gordon, 1981). First, the group must recognize the conflict. Then the leader asks for presentation of more related facts. Areas of agreement can be found and pointed out. The leader should look at the assumptions being made by both groups. Often, the two groups are really looking at two separate issues that need to be dealt with separately. Finally, the leader diverts the process from a search for resolution (which is producing the conflict) to further review or restatement of the problem or to further review of background information.

Attacker

There are some members who ridicule or attack ideas of other members. The leader can point out that an attack has just occurred. The ridicule can be softened by "stroking" the victim: "As a matter of fact, that idea is not as farfetched as it might seem on the surface. Two years ago, it was tried with some success by Jane" (Lobingier, 1969).

Conclusion

Effective meeting leadership requires far more skill than merely acting as a referee of opinions or an announcer of administrative information. Careful pre-planning is needed, as well as sensitivity and diplomacy, follow-up skills, and knowledge of appropriate leadership styles. The ability to effectively lead various meetings will improve staff morale and performance and can build one's reputation as a good manager among peers and upper management.

References


