



Keeping Meetings Moving

When you're in charge of a meeting – whether it is a County Farm Bureau Board of Directors, a standing committee or special task force – it's your job to keep the meeting moving along. "Lasts too long" is the biggest complaint people have about meetings; sometimes, it's the people who are participating (or not participating) that bog things down.

Edward Scannell, director of the Arizona State University conference bureau and past president of Meeting Planners International, has identified several personality types who can keep a meeting from accomplishing its goals. See if you recognize any – and check out Scannell's suggestions for dealing with them.

- **The Griper:** has a pet peeve s/he wants the group to know about. Even if s/he has a legitimate point, point out that policy can't be changed in the meeting and the object is to operate as best you can under the current system. Offer to discuss the problem later or ask another group member to respond to the complaint.
- **Highly Argumentative:** always or occasionally. Keep your own temper firmly in check, and don't let other meeting participants get excited. Try to find honest, merit in one of his or her points, express your agreement, and then move on. If s/he makes an obvious misstatement, wait to see if another group member will respond. As a last resort, call a recess to discuss the problem privately.
- **Inarticulate:** a person with good ideas who can't express them well. Don't jump in and say, "What you mean is..." Instead, say: "Let me repeat that" and put the thought into better language.
- **Off the Subject, not rambling, just off base:** Take the blame—"Something I said must have led you off the subject – this is what we were discussing." Restate the point and get back to business.
- **The Rambler:** gets off the subject and uses lots of time doing it. When s/he pauses for breath, express thanks for the thoughts advanced, then refocus everyone's attention by restating the relevant points and move on. Glance at your watch if you need to, to get the speaker's attention.
- **Overly Talkative:** may be exceptionally well informed on an issue, a show-off or just naturally wordy. Slow him or her down with some difficult

questions. Interrupt with: "That's an interesting point. Now let's see what the group thinks of it." In general, Scannell advises, let the group take care of problem situations as much as possible.

- Personality Clashers: two or more members who clash, sometimes dividing the group into factions. Emphasize points of agreement, minimize points of disagreement. Draw attention to the objectives of the meeting. Ask a direct question related to the topic. Bring an objective member into the discussion. Ask that personalities be omitted from the subject at hand.
- The Quick Helper: s/he's trying to help, but may be participating so much, others can't. Tactfully suggest "we put others to work." Use the Quick Helper to summarize points of discussion.
- Silent Sam/antha: someone who just won't talk because of boredom, indifference, timidity, conceit or insecurity. Your approach depends on what you think is motivating (or rather, not motivating!) the individual. Try asking the individual a direct question. If timidity seems to be the problem, ask a question of the person next to Silent Sam/antha, then ask Sam/antha to comment on the neighbor's response- as if it were a private, rather than group, conversation. Compliment the timid individual for making a contribution. If a silent group member seems to be projecting a feeling of superiority, compliment his or her knowledge (if you can do it sincerely), then ask for an opinion or comment on the topic at hand.
- The Stubborn Stickler: someone who won't change his or her mind, won't see your points. Throw this person's views to the group and have members react. Offer to discuss points of contention later, but ask the individual to accept the group's viewpoint for the moment.
- The Opinion Solicitor: someone who is trying to put you as the meeting's leader, on the spot, to support one viewpoint. Point out that your own view is relatively unimportant, compared to the view of the entire group. Ask the other members of the group to give their opinions on the topic.
- Talkers on the Side: people holding their own conversations, which may or may not relate to the topic at hand. Don't embarrass them. Call one by name and ask an easy question or restate the last remark made by a member of the group and ask for an opinion of it.

Did you recognize any of these personality types, or perhaps you've seen one in a mirror? People don't bring only their best qualities to a meeting. So it's up to you as the leader of the meeting to be sure their lesser traits don't get in the way of their making a contribution – or of the meeting accomplishing its purpose in a timely fashion.

