

Procedure Is Not Punishment

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Structure, agendas and procedures for meetings ensure that time is well spent, that everyone's opportunity to contribute is protected and that decisions are made with good input. Some complain, and I would agree, that too much structure limits the free-flow of ideas and the fun-factor that keeps creativity high.

However, without clear procedures for meeting conduct and interaction, the chaos that follows results in frustration and missed opportunities to serve customers. In other words, meeting procedures can serve as protections for people and for productivity. The process tools used to guide meeting discussion and results can be engaging, interactive and even entertaining without creating any sense of over-control or punishment.

Meeting process tools include agendas with clear time-frames, agenda items with time-limits, and with time for summarizing the meeting's results. Brainstorming is a powerful tool for generating ideas as long as it concludes with assignments for next actions to be taken. Consensus is a discussion and decision-making tool that can create more buy-in and commitment to following through than sometimes voting creates. That being said, voting is a useful tool when time is limited, a decision needs to be made and action needs to follow.

Flowcharting or work-process charting is helpful when work procedures need documenting or need improvement. Strategic planning tools include mission and vision defining, analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and can move an organization forward with purpose and strength. Whatever process tools are chosen, the meeting leader's responsibility is to get the right things discussed, decided upon and done, in a timely manner and in a way that encourages people to keep working together.

When conducting formal meetings where votes and minutes are required, using parliamentary procedure will be valuable. The most recognized parliamentary authority used in meetings is Robert's Rules of Order. The Idaho Legislature uses Mason's Manual. Whichever rules you choose to use, the key points are: protect time for everyone to speak; hear from the pro and the con side of a debate before closing debate; understand how many motions there are and how to handle each motion that might be made; and know whether a majority or two-thirds vote count is needed to reach a conclusion.

Action Item: April is Parliamentary Law Month. Brush up on your parliamentary skills. A staff meeting, volunteer, board, or community meeting will benefit from your increased knowledge of meeting processes that protect everyone's chance to participate in the meeting. Conduct a web-search for more information on parliamentary tools or visit www.parliamentarians.org.

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