

Making Staff Meetings Effective

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Introduction

Schools are the formal setup of education wherein the teachers and students interact with each other for achieving pre-determined objectives. Schools become great not because of their magnificent buildings and modern infrastructure but because of the effective and efficient staff. Headmaster in any school is like an engine in the ship. A headmaster is the organiser, leader, governor, director, guide and co-ordinator of all school programmes. Headmaster in any school plays a pivotal role in school administration. He/she has to play an important leadership role in the effective functioning of school. He/she has to get the work done from his staff members and needs to communicate the expectations from them. The teachers need to be guided, motivated and even helped to give their maximum output. The regular staff meeting is the most important tool available to the headmaster to know his/her staff members, understand their problems and help them in achieving the organisational goal. "Staff meetings are an integral part of professional development. The staff meeting can be a creative process for growth of staff members and the road to innovative solutions to educational problems" (Matalon, & Calo, & Yahpe, 2005)

Need and Importance of Staff Meetings

Staff meetings in the organisation enhance the communication which makes up the foundation of any institution. Meetings are a venue for voicing opinions, discussing the latest organizational policies and procedures, increasing the effectiveness of decision-making, addressing employee problems and concerns, and setting goals. The decisions taken in staff meetings bring the ownership in the work they (staff) do. Furthermore, these staff members will feel a sense of trust for the head master who includes them in the planning and processes. Since employees spend a great deal of their lives at work, it is important to make them feel that they are a part of the success of the organization as it meets its strategic goals. Staff meetings allow staff members to be a part of the decision-making process of the organization because employees can communicate their opinions, ideas, etc., in a structured, yet commonly, accepted, means for doing so. While final authority and decision-making belongs to the head master of an organization, they reach out to their employees for their valuable input. Head masters who utilize these meetings as a communication tools open up a great opportunity for staff members to share their workday experiences with one another.

School heads as leaders and managers need to utilize their resources (people, money, property and time) effectively and efficiently so as to ensure that the school is and stays productive and profitable from an educational perspective. Well-planned and facilitated meetings sustain participants' energy and allow them to contribute their best thinking to the planning endeavour.

Staff meetings are important for both: Head masters and teachers

For the Head masters: It is helpful to headmaster in following ways:

- Improves the planning and co-ordination of activities that have an impact on institution.

- Creates a sense of unity and connectedness among the staff members.
- Brings a wide variety of voices and collective wisdom to bear on important issues/ problems and changes facing workplace.
- Overall improved efficiency and effectiveness.
- Provides an opportunity to get to know staff members.

For the staff member:

- Enhances the sense of ownership and importance of staff members by ensuring meaningful and productive participation in decisions that affect staff members.
- Provides an opportunity to keep informed on what is going on.
- Enables staff to understand, appreciate and support each other's work.
- Improved job satisfaction by being more involved

Reasons of Conducting Staff Meeting

The staff Meetings in any educational organisation are conducted mainly for the following reasons:

- Solving specific problems
- Brainstorming new ideas
- Keeping staff informed
- Making decisions
- Presenting a proposal for discussion
- Discussing areas of change
- Seeking feedback
- Promoting team spirit
- Planning future service
- Providing direction
- Giving Support
- Professional development

It is established fact that staff meetings in any organisation are important. But if these staff meetings are not conducted properly then it may not be fruitful and will be merely a time wasting activity. To understand the status of staff meeting in schools the researcher undertook a small exploratory study in some of the schools of vadodara city.

Purpose of The Study

Staff meetings are an important way of communication in any organisation. Staff meetings will be effective if all the staff members actively participate in them and share their opinions and suggestions. The Head master is the chairman of the staff meetings. It is the responsibility of headmaster to provide a conducive environment for his/her staff members to actively interact and share their concerns and issues without any hesitations and fear. The purpose of this study is to explore the status of staff meetings in the schools of Vadodara. To gain an insight of these meetings and come out with the suggestions to make them effective.

Objectives of The Study

1. To understand the present status of staff meetings in schools of Vadodara.
2. To suggest the head masters role in facilitating staff

meetings.

The researcher interacted with school teachers to understand the present status of the staff meetings in the school of Vadodara city. An unstructured interview was conducted with teachers and principals for the same. The transcripts were prepared while interacting with them and content analysis of data was done to gain the meaning out of it.

Present Status of Staff Meetings

On the analysis of the information collected from the staff members the following points emerged:

Almost all agreed that staff meetings are important in organisation. Though there is no denial that staff meetings are important but we still find that most of the staff members do not like staff meetings and call it a time consuming activity.

Meetings are waste of time

Some of the staff members confessed that there is waste of precious time at various staff gatherings. Unproductive meetings waste time. Devoting too much time to the meeting or to one topic can also be problematic. Many of the school teachers have described faculty meetings as meaningless, ineffective, and unrelated to what they need to improve in their own teaching. Many have felt that meetings were often —boring and not stimulating. This is also supported by (Sarason, 2004, p. 134). Meetings are conducted for meeting sake as the headmaster is expected to conduct meetings. In many cases the meeting though is only related to few staff members but still all members are invited. Put simply, teachers are not receiving any psychological benefits from attending staff meetings. Motivation and incentive are nonexistent. Teachers go unrecognized.

Most of the time meetings go off-track

Individuals wander off the topic. Participants spend more time digressing than discussing. Meetings get way out of control. The meetings end up discussing the matter which is not on agenda. Most of the teachers reported that many times the focus gets shifted and the feelings of competency, self-worth, self-confidence, appreciation, and self-efficacy are replaced by feelings of intimidation, disrespect, distrust, uncertainty, and bitterness (Rich, 1998).

Lack of clarity regarding the purpose of the meeting

The teachers reported in most of the cases that there is no clarity regarding the purpose of the meeting. The meetings are conducted for the sake of meeting, resulting in bored participants and time wasted. In many cases it is seen as punishing act by headmasters my making teachers sit for long hours in the name of meeting. Due to this most of the staff members lose interest. This is also being reported by Rooney, 2006 “Most scheduled gatherings of teachers are, in fact, meetings at which teachers yawn their way through lists of informational items announced and commented on by the principal. If any clear communication results from those meetings, it takes place in the parking lot long after the official meeting has ended”.

Lack of follow up

Nothing happens once the meeting ends. Staff members do not convert decisions into action. This makes them non participant in the staff meetings. The staff reported that no follow up is being done on the discussion and decisions which were taken in the

earlier meetings. Due to this the teachers do not act on it as they know that nothing is going to happen as soon as they will leave the meeting.

On analysing the above difficulties of staff meeting and with the help of literature review the following suggestions are made to make the staff meetings conducive and fruitful.

Policy regarding staff meeting

The head master should have a well drafted policy related to staff meetings for the organisation. It should contain all the details regarding the procedure of conducting staff meeting, expectations of staff members, where when and how the staff meetings are to be conducted. Which items could be included in staff meeting, Minute taking, minute distribution, agenda distribution. A policy can be developed explaining the procedure and expectations of staff members which will assist with ensuring awareness of responsibilities toward these meetings. During an induction period, new staff members joining the team should be expected to read and become familiar with the policies and procedures of the meetings. So include this information in the staff handbook as part of the staff orientation package.

Planning meetings

Successful staff meetings are always planned and controlled. But, if staff meetings are not planned and action plans and milestones are not decided upon, the staff meeting will not be meaningful or productive. The staff meetings should be planned in advance unless and until it is not urgent. It should not come as a sudden thing to the staff members as it becomes difficult for the staff member to contribute to the topic and also if it is conducted after school hours the staff members may not be prepared to stay back as they do have family responsibilities. Based on the size of the staff members, develop a realistic timeframe for these meetings to occur that will ensure adequate communication. It may be appropriate for smaller staff members (such as educator meetings, room leaders group, and pedagogical leadership planning) to have a regular catch up every couple of weeks; larger groups may only be able to meet once a month. While planning for meeting the following points should be considered:

Objective of the meeting

An effective meeting has a purpose and gets finished in the time allotted. Before the head master calls a meeting he should ensure first regarding the necessity of meeting. He should weigh the pros and cons of holding meeting. A good meeting yields many results; a bad meeting is a waste of time. The headmaster should be clear regarding the objective of meeting. Whether the objective is to share information, make decision, gather ideas, connect with others etc. Ineffective meetings take place when administrators call an unnecessary meeting. “A common culprit of ineffective meetings involves getting the staff together only to read a list of announcements” (Eller, 2006). The Head master can disseminate information, such as announcements, in a more efficient way versus reading to a group of individuals fully capable of doing such a task independently.

Who should attend meeting

The objective of the meeting will help you in deciding the members who need to attend the meeting. The head master should consider the staff size, and think whether everyone needs to be in the meeting. If the meeting is general in nature wherein the information is to be

shared then all members needs to be present, but if the meeting is specific in nature for eg: discussing the curriculum of science then all staff members need not be present in meeting. Only the science teachers should be asked to attend meeting as they are the one who can contribute for others it will be just waste of time.

Timing

The head master should think about the right time to attend the meeting. Various schedules need to be considered before planning the meeting time. The time should be convenient to the staff members. In some school the days are fixed for staff meetings like every second or fourth Saturday after school hours. Timing is one of the barrier to effective staff meetings as most of the time the meetings are conducted after long school hours for which teachers are not prepared. Time has been identified as one barrier of successful meetings. Method of delivery, intent of faculty meetings, and poor school community relationships include other barriers involved in weakening the productivity of meetings (Eller, 2006).

Circulate the agenda

Once the objective(s) has been clearly stated and the participants selected, make sure to communicate this prior to the meeting so that they can prepare in advance. Participants can contribute to the meeting if they come to meeting prepared (Parker & Hofmen 2006). This simple step will assure that the meeting can benefit all parties involved and accomplish its goal. In busy work environments, we can forget that the participants have as much responsibility to make meetings time-efficient and effective as the person conducting the meeting.

The items covered in agenda should be relevant to all. They have to be important to everyone in the meeting. They have to be taken seriously. If the agenda items are relevant and if the staff feels that it will help them in resolving their problems or are helpful for their professional development then they will seriously contribute and will not think meeting as a waste of time activity. Meetings should address the needs of teachers (Jones, 1995).

Creating an effective agenda is fundamental in planning a productive meeting. Here are some reasons why the meeting agenda is so important:

- Provides a list of topics for discussion
- Provides a structure for the meeting (how long to spend on which topics)
- Can be used as a checklist to ensure that all information is covered
- Provides a focus for the meeting (the objective of the meeting must be clearly stated in the agenda)
- Provides opportunity to participants to come prepared for upcoming discussions.
- Helps to increase engagement and motivation from your colleagues
- increases accountability to the objectives of the meeting

Having put clear thought into the purpose of each staff meeting, the subsequent written agenda should be short, simple and clear, listing upfront the content of the next meeting. Remember, Vague agendas can lead to muddled discussion and misunderstandings, so clarity and advance consultation with participants about what is to be discussed is important. Once the agenda is agreed, it is helpful to document the amount of time you plan for each area of discussion, as time set aside for meetings is precious and you

need to ensure the discussion keeps moving in the right direction. Remember not to include too many items in an agenda as this will take from meaningful discussion on important issues. When finalising the agenda always look to start with a positive item. Circulate the agenda at least one week in advance of the meeting. If anything needs to be read in advance of the meeting, ensure a copy is circulated beforehand.

While preparing agenda the following points should be kept in mind by the Head master:

- Think of what overall outcome you want from the meeting and what activities need to occur to reach that outcome. The agenda should be organized so that these activities are conducted during the meeting.
- In the agenda, state the overall outcome that you want from the meeting.
- Next to each major topic, include the type of action needed, the type of output expected (decision, vote, action assigned to someone), and time estimates for addressing each topic.
- Don't overly design meetings; be open to adapting the meeting agenda if members are making progress in the planning process.
- Think about how you frame an event so people come in with that mindset. It may pay to have a short discussion around the title to develop a common mindset among attendees.
- Of course, the most important part of creating an effective agenda is to follow it during the meeting.

Once the agenda has been set and you have a basic structure to work from, the next step in this planning process is to consider how this agenda will be implemented and goals accomplished. Meetings often work better if a facilitator is assigned to run the meeting. They make sure that all goes smoothly, that everyone has a chance to speak, that timelines and procedures are followed and that, if possible, everybody leaves the room satisfied. Sounds like a tough job! It can be. All you need is practice.

Facilitating meeting

The overall manner, spirit and tone in which the staff meeting is conducted, is critical to achieving meaningful participation and productive outcomes. At the outset in the interest of fairness, it is important that time is spent with the staff members on establishing some general ground rules that can be applied throughout the course of the meetings. It is important to note that the most effective ground rules are those which the staff members have collectively set out together.

Set ground rules

The powerful basic ground rules which a head master and staff members should consider are to :

- participate
- respect others
- stay focused on the agenda
- maintain momentum and
- get things done.

Assign facilitator

The head master needs to facilitate the meetings. Facilitation is about process (how you do something) – rather than content (what you do). The main purpose of having a facilitator at the meeting is to create an environment of openness and purpose. Having an assigned facilitator during your meeting can help the group keep to its task while simultaneously paying attention to personal needs

of each group member. If the same participants meet regularly, which is common in small organizations, consider rotating roles so that everyone gets a chance to acquire and develop their meeting facilitation skills. The facilitator will make sure that all needed preparations are done well in advance for the meetings. Facilitator will also ensure that conducive environment is created, proper seating arrangements made, arrangement for refreshment during the meetings, proper lights and ventilation to be checked.

Note taker

Note taking is very important aspect of staff meetings. If you want the meetings to be fruitful important points are to be noted. The Head master himself/herself can do the note taking or else can assign the task of note taking to someone. The minute is to be prepared towards the end of meetings. These notes will be very useful for minutes writing. The person who is given the responsibility of preparing minutes can only be assigned the task of note taking as it will help in future.

Encourage staff members to participate

The Head master who is also the chairperson of the meetings should ensure that all the staff members contribute to the staff meetings. He should create space for all the voices to be heard. He should encourage the staff members to give their valuable suggestions. If the staff meeting is conducted on some topic wherein some serious thinking is needed the headmaster should ask the staff members too come prepared on the topic. The staff members are the people who are actually going to implement some of the decisions taken in the meetings so their involvement will create belongingness to the decision. The head master should have positive attitude towards the opinion shared by the staff members, he should value the suggestions given by the staff members. The staff members should feel comfortable in expressing their views and ideas related to any issue or concern in the meeting.

Focussed Discussion

It is a very common notion among staff members that staff meetings are wastage of time. This is mainly because many of the times the meetings go off track and discussions on topics which are not important and are not on agenda takes place. In order to prevent staff members from getting overwhelmed, tired, or frustrated due to information overload, staff meetings should focus around a central theme. The theme may contain one to three subtopics. Sticking to the theme ensures the meeting's purpose will be maintained (Mehermann, 2006).

Circulate minutes with outcomes of meeting

Minutes are a record of the meeting for those that were at the meeting and they are an important source of information for those who were not there. Minute writing is one of the important aspects of any staff meetings. The minutes should be well drafted and should be circulated to the staff members. The meetings summary or the minutes should be circulated among the staff members within 48 hours of the meeting. Delay in this will lead to lack of interest. Memories are unreliable so It is useful to have a written record of the meeting, including actions and decisions. The minutes are a good reference for attendees and serve to refresh memories.

Minutes of Meeting describe what was discussed and decided in a meeting, providing a permanent record of the meeting for future reference. They tend to include an overview of the structure of

the meeting, including.

- Those present and those who could not attend
- A list of the agenda items/topics
- Summary of discussion for each agenda item
- The actions people committed to
- Summary of any decisions made

Prior to the meeting, one of the attendees is normally designated as the minute taker.

The minute taker generally completes the following tasks

- Taking notes during the meeting
- Formalising or tidying up these notes after the meeting
- Distributing the minutes to the relevant people
- Filing minutes for future reference

Evaluating and follow up of meetings

Meetings are a great forum to update, problem solve and keep progress maintained. However the efficiency and effectiveness of the meetings must be evaluated at regular intervals by both organisers and participants to assess if and where improvements are required. When conducting an evaluation, be mindful to integrate the suggestions, decision and/or feedback received into future meetings. People will stop providing feedback in meetings if they don't see that their feedback is being considered or used. Evaluate the staff meetings. Check what is working? What needs improvement?

Observe the general body language at meetings, do participants appear comfortable and get involved in discussions?

Ensure participants are asked at the end of meetings "How do you think that meeting went?"

The evaluation is not the time to debate what people said. Ask for clarifications or solutions as to how to handle a particular part of the meeting next time. Allow the feedback to flow. It will help people feel heard, improve your process, reduce frustration and create hope that meetings will continue to evolve. It's the Head Masters core role in ensuring the meetings are effective, regular and productive.

Conclusion

Effective staff meetings do not just happen, they are designed. The Head masters who want to improve staff meeting should take into consideration several components such as preparing the meeting, conducting the meeting and closing the meetings and follow up. For making the effective staff meetings the Head master should focus improvement efforts on processes that create a respectful and safe environment and allow for diverse perspectives to be discussed. Staff meetings can help solve problems efficiently and effectively, develop stronger bonds between team members and provide better care for students.

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