"Lost time is never found again."
— Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard’s Almanac

Have you ever thought about how much time you spend in meetings? A conservative estimate is that most of us who work will spend between six and twelve hours per week attending meetings. At this rate, many of us will spend one-fifth to one-third of our total work time in meetings!

Serving on a planning commission and attending meetings are synonymous. It is hard to do one without the other. Accordingly, one way to measure whether or not a planning commission is functioning well is to examine how it spends its meeting time. This column will introduce strategies a commission can follow to minimize “lost” time.

MEETING UPS AND DOWNS

During our planning commission training sessions we spend a considerable amount of time exploring the nature of meetings. One of the more interesting exercises involves having the participants complete the following question: “If our planning commission meetings could talk what might they say?” As you might suspect, this question has generated some very interesting responses. We’ve had meetings tell us: “I’m happy that’s over. I feel good. I’ve got more to do. What a great meeting. I need a drink. If that happens one more time I’ll do something you will regret.” Who ever said meetings don’t have a sense of humor?

Another exercise that generates much discussion involves determining why some planning commission meetings succeed while others fail. Commonly cited reasons for successful commission meetings include: the meeting started on time; the commission followed the agenda; the public was able to participate; the meeting accomplished a predetermined task; and, regardless of whether the actual time you spent reviewing reports was, say, one hour or three hours. The goal is to determine relative proportions.

Exercise #2: Determining the Relative Proportions of Your Meeting Time. This exercise is the same as the first one, except that you are now indicating how you spend your meeting time. Again, first list the kind of activities your commission engages in during meetings (i.e., public hearings, discussing issues, old business). Next, determine the proportion of time you spend on each type of activity, and display this on the second clock face.

By calculating how you spend your time, and then seeing it starkly displayed on a clock face, you might be surprised. Do the relative amounts of time you spend on various activities — both at your meeting and between meetings — correspond to their relative importance? Does your time allocation correspond to your commission’s priorities? For some commissions and commissioners, these exercises reveal that priorities are being “buried” by time spent on activities which are not of as much significance.

In my next column, I’ll discuss “debriefing” a meeting: an underutilized, but quite valuable, technique for improving the use of your meeting time.

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How many times have you left a commission meeting and found yourself, usually with one or several colleagues, discussing what went right or what went wrong with the just concluded meeting? If your experience matches mine, you probably have to admit that you engage in this type of discussion fairly often. And I bet your favorite place for holding such discussions is the parking lot outside your meeting place!

The reality accompanying “parking lot analysis” is that it does little to help improve the effectiveness of commission meetings. This is because it rarely extends beyond two or three commissioners. The full commission does not benefit from the discussion.

**FORMAL DEBRIEFINGS**

Taking the time to formally brief a meeting is important because briefing lets us know if our meetings are working — and our meetings must work if we hope to have an effective commission. Although there are many ways to formally brief a meeting, two styles seem to work best. The first is a “verbal” brief. Using this method, the commission chair, at the conclusion of the regular meeting, engages the membership in a structured discussion focusing on what went well (or not so well) during the meeting. For this approach to work, the chair will need, in advance, to prepare various questions or points to be covered during the verbal brief. The remaining members of the commission should also know what these questions will be. During the discussion, the chair should strongly encourage all commissioners to participate.

Among the more common questions asked:

Was the meeting well organized and efficiently managed? Was the agenda clear? Was the agenda followed? Did members listen to one another? Did all members have an opportunity to participate? Did the commission accomplish something as a result of the meeting? Was the meeting a good use of the members’ time? Was the meeting a success or not, and why?

The second debriefing style is only slightly different. Rather than verbally debriefing the meeting, commissioners are asked to complete a short survey. The primary advantage of this approach is that it takes less time to complete, and (if necessary) commissioners can take the survey home with them after the meeting and mail it in. Another advantage, in the estimation of some users, is that impressions and feelings are not expressed in public.

The results of debriefings will usually provide insights that can improve the quality of commission meetings. Sometimes the results will highlight topics the commission should discuss during a work session or special meeting.

To be most useful, formal debriefs should be done on a regular basis. This will allow you to spot trends in how well your meetings are going. Depending on how frequently you meet, I suggest doing debriefs either monthly or quarterly.

Taking time to formally brief meetings will, for many commissions, represent a change in their way of doing business. As with most change, there will be some fear and concern. It has been my experience, however, that the benefits will outweigh any “discomfort” involved.

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