Agenda Development

The leader's style, the group's developmental
stage, and the organization's goals should determine
the type and method of agenda development

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A well-planned agenda can be one of the most effective tools for increasing the productivity of an organization. The nature of any organization requires meetings of the people who benefit from group goals and projects. As meetings are the vehicle for bringing people together to make decisions, an agenda is the tool for planning an orderly, efficient meeting.

Simply defined, an agenda is a listing of topics, issues, or problems which will be discussed at a meeting. There are many formats and methods of developing an agenda, but the definition remains the same.

The art of agenda development should be learned and used for five reasons, all of which can be of value to your organization.

• An agenda lets group members know what to expect at the meeting so they will start thinking on the same track. If individuals come to the meeting with different expectations of what is going to be discussed, the leader's ability to accomplish the meeting's purpose will be interrupted until everyone realizes and agrees with the reason for meeting.

• An agenda that is announced in advance allows group members to prepare for the meeting, particularly those members who like to think through issues more than others. This process also eliminates potential dominance at meetings by members who think faster on their fee.

• An agenda provides an order for dealing with issues at a meeting. The placement of each issue can be used as a way of identifying what needs to be discussed first. By prioritizing the issues on the agenda, the leader ensures that the most important items will be dealt with even if the meeting time runs out.

• An agenda can be used to teach group members how to prepare reports for a meeting. Members who are not accustomed to reporting on the progress of their committee or a task they were assigned, often do not know what information is important to share and what would be irrelevant. By listing questions or describing what should be covered in each report on the agenda, the leader informally teaches members how to develop their reports to the group. This type of agenda can also remind members of what tasks they promised to have completed by the next meeting. It gives members a gentle nudge to get the job done and often provides them with opportunities to succeed because they might have otherwise forgotten.

• An agenda also spreads the responsibility for accomplishing tasks to all the people attending the meeting. This delegation helps the leader and the organization to be more efficient, because the leader is not the only one who is responsible for the group's

task accomplishment in every meeting. Also, a planned agenda allows the committee members to keep the leader on track.

Methods of agenda development

Agendas can be developed using five basic methods. Each has an appropriate time and place. As a leader, the more methods you feel comfortable using, the greater your effectiveness will be in accomplishing your organization's goals.

The one-person approach to agenda development involves one person, usually the organization's leader, planning the next meeting's agenda without anyone's help.

This method is appropriate if you have run out of time and the only alternative is no agenda. When faced with such a choice, it is always better to have an agenda. The one-person method also works well when the organization has adopted a formal standing agenda for all or most of its meetings. Another situation in which the method is appropriate is when you, as the leader of the organization, feel that certain items must be covered and that this is not going to change – regardless of how much input you receive from other members!

This approach has obvious pros and cons. It is efficient, because you do not have to depend on others to produce it, you can always be on time. Consequently, it is only as effective as the organization's leader. If the leader is always in tune with what issues and items need to be discussed, the agenda will be effective. If the leader is not aware of some interpersonal or process issues (interaction between people) affecting the group, the agenda may look great, but it may not be effective.

Conflicts and hidden agendas – those opinions people have which affect their interaction and voting – may operate and inhibit the group from getting through the original agenda. Furthermore, if only one person develops the agenda, the other group members may not have as much ownership, or investment in, the meeting topics.

The agenda with written or verbal input from group members prior to the meeting is still the leader's responsibility; however, the leader asks members for items they want placed on the agenda. The leader might require formal input by asking for items to be delivered in writing two days prior to the meeting. The leader might also solicit input informally by calling or asking for ideas as members are seen around campus.

This type of agenda can be effective if the members are experienced and have enough knowledge about the organization to respond spontaneously with appropriate information. If a person has not been with the organization very long, this kind of agenda development is difficult because the individual cannot react quickly enough and often does not have enough knowledge to feel as if he or she has anything relevant to offer.

This method of agenda development is often more effective than the one-person agenda because the group members feel more involved in the agenda. They can see their own items on the agenda when it is distributed, which make members more involved in a meeting.

The success of collecting agenda items often depends on matching the level of formality with the organization. If the organization usually operates on a handshake and a person's work, asking for written agenda items often becomes a block to getting any response from the members, frustrating the leader and the group members. If you use this method, be sure to check with the members for their preference for soliciting information. Individuals' preferences will often vary and the group leader may have to work with a mixture of the written and verbal agenda items.

- The Executive Committee can also develop and approve the agenda. This method is often used in organizations such as student governments. The executive committee meets before the organization's meeting to develop and approve the agenda items. The executive then distributes it to group members.

The effectiveness of this method depends on the quality and thoroughness of the executive committee members as well as their attitude toward the agenda. This method will work well if the executive members ask their committees or constituencies what they want on the agenda. The executive committee must also be aware of potential issues or problems. If they are not aware or do not solicit items, the meeting often develops into an overt or covert fight between group members and the organization's leaders. This fighting is also likely to occur if the executive committee uses the agenda to manipulate their organization, especially if the members are involved and concerned.

This method of agenda development is most useful in organizations, which are very complex or diversified, either in interests or distance. It is also effective for groups, which do not meet very often. The group leader can set aside five or ten minutes at the end of each meeting to solicit items for next week's agenda. This method is most effective when the group is composed of no more than 20 members and meets regularly.

This approach to agenda development gets everyone involved in planning the next meeting. It keeps the group accomplishing tasks and thinking ahead. Sometimes, however, issues will arise mid-week. This will not be a problem if the group's attitude is flexible about adding additional items to the agenda between meetings.

The entire group can develop the agenda at the beginning of each meeting as the first item of business. This is most effective when the leader's time management skills have temporarily regressed and the agenda did not get developed! It is useful to write the times on a blackboard so everyone can see what needs to be accomplished. It is also helpful to cross out the item after it has been discussed as an incentive for the group to keep going, giving positive reinforcement for completing each task.

Agenda formats

A leader can use six basic formats when developing the agenda. Like the methods, each format has its appropriateness and usefulness based on your organization.

Formal or Standing Agenda – This agenda's main points look the same from meeting to meeting. The most familiar example of this format would be found in student senate meetings. Your agenda might look like this:

Meeting title, place, time, and date
1. Quorum Count
2. Minutes Approval
3. Agenda Approval
4. Officer Reports (These could be listed by name or office.)
5. Committee Reports (These also could be listed.)
6. Old Business
7. New Business
8. Discussion Items
9. Announcements

The benefit of the standing agenda is its structure. Members know what to expect and when each issue will be addressed. Its drawbacks are the same as its strengths. Sometimes it is too structured and formalized, as it does not allow for changes in the group's development or mood. Also, if a very controversial issue is facing the group, most members will be less focused on the first six items because they are spending a share of their energy thinking of the "hot" issue.

Informal or Flexible Agenda – This agenda may look quite different from meeting to meeting. All the important items will be discussed in an order, which matches the group's development and readiness. This approach might be effective for the first

meeting of the year, when you have five programs running, committee members are still returning to school, and things are not settled. An example would be:

Agenda – The Very First Program Board Meeting
Thursday, September 6, Room 228, Student Union
1. Identify what you need to cover at this meeting (those things you need to know or need help with to get through this week)
   A. Brainstorm list
   B. Rank order list
   C. Go over each item
2. Things you need to know to do your job
   A. Brainstorm list
   B. Identify when you need this information
   C. What is the best method to learn these things?
3. Meeting format
   A. What is the purpose of board meetings?
   B. How should people prepare for meetings?
   C. What do you expect of me (the president)?
4. This quarter's meeting schedule

Another partial example might be:

Agenda
1. Old Business (List the issues which need to be resolved)
2. Reports
3. New Business
4. Announcements

The key point is that the informal agenda will change shape depending on the needs of the group and the needs of the organization. If a particular item requires a great deal of discussion, this format would call for it first on the agenda so members would have a greater amount of energy to deal with the issue.

This format is advantageous in that it adapts to the situation. As long as the group leader can assess the stage or needs of the group, it can be very effective. A possible disadvantage of this agenda is that the leader has to feel comfortable with changing the format.

Prioritized agenda – This agenda always lists the items to be discussed, reported, or announced in order of importance. The item at the top would help the organization accomplish its objective most. The second item would be slightly less important, and so forth.

The chief advantage of prioritizing your agenda is that the group is often freshest at the beginning of the meeting and will generally make better decisions at the time. It also ensures that the most necessary items and issues will always be dealt with – and you will not leave the meeting with the biggest issues unresolved! The disadvantage of the prioritized agenda is that the leader's priorities may differ from the priorities set forth by organizational goals.

Time agenda – The timed agenda can be used with any of the above formats. This format simply adds a time limit to each item. A partial example would be:

I. Old Business
   A. Ideas for our new logo – 15 minutes

    B. Discussion of the Program Evaluation Form Draft – Leslie – 10 minutes

II. New Business
   A. Motion: Contemporary Committee
     Re: John Denver – 15 minutes

      This agenda can be timed by item or it can allot a total amount of time for the entire meeting. For example, the meeting a day before final exams could be limited to 30 minutes instead of the usual hour.

      This format can be advantageous because it makes group members conscious of the passage of time during the meeting, therefore they will learn to be concise. On the other hand, time is another form of structure, and for some organizations or members, it can take the fun out of meetings.

      The descriptive agenda – This agenda gives a lot of information to the reader so that he or she can be more prepared for the meeting. An abbreviated example would be:

Agenda: Board Meeting #2, Wednesday,
        September 12, 4:30 p.m.
        Room 228, Student Union

In reading this agenda, notice the questions and subjects listed under your report and also the assignment under section II. Please come to the meeting with information and ideas regarding these areas so that we can make this meeting worth your time.

Roll Call
I.   Regular Reports (Try to keep it to 10 minutes)
   A. Vice president – Shelly
     1. Beginning of the year hassles:
       membership cards, applications, office hours, schedules, etc.
     2. Committee structures, appointment
     3. Other
   B. Secretary/Treasurer – Connie
     1. Approval of minutes
     2. How should minutes be handled in the office?
     3. Evaluation of first week's financial matters – problems, concerns, etc.
     4. Other
   C. Adviser's Report – Kathy
     1. Videotape legalities
     1. New budgeting policies from the Business Office
     2. Other
II.   Committee Reports
   A. Music – Marc
     1. Evaluation and report on "Patriot" dance
       a) Attendance
       b) Production – How smooth was it? How did you assign people tasks? Was the method successful?
       c) Total income and expense breakdown
       d) Compliments and complaints (problems that need to be solved for the future)
       e) What did we learn from this event?
     2. Evaluation and Report on "Nexus"concert (Repeat steps a-e of "Patriot" dance)

      3. Upcoming music events

      4. Other

   B. Films – Kevin

III.   Regarding our upcoming year as a Programming Board, I'd like to know what you (committee chairs and officers) need to know to do a successful job this year. Please come up with at least one specific example in each area concerning:

   A. Skills needed to program: i.e., negotiating, contracting, scheduling

   B. Leadership skills: i.e., setting up committee goals, etc.

   C. Information: i.e., policies, procedures, etc.

IV.   Other

   Announcements

This agenda has many advantages. The members know more information about the meeting and can prepare better. Members can be more efficient, resulting in less "shuffling of papers" and fewer "no reports." The leader can also gently nudge and remind members to complete assignments which were given at the previous meeting. If the information given in this agenda format is complete enough, it can also cut down discussion time because the essential facts of the issue will already be presented.

A disadvantage of this format is the time it takes to develop properly. It might also appear that the meeting will take a long time, particularly if you have had a history of long, ineffective meetings.

Intervention agenda- This agenda's main purpose is to make the group sensitive to its internal processes and to prompt the group to analyze these processes. The intervention agenda can be presented in three different formats.

The first format is to have the group set aside a certain amount of time to examine how group members are interacting. The content could include reviewing the meeting, identifying each person's degree of involvement, examining clarity of communication and examining the decision- making process for effectiveness and completeness. The time set aside could be as short as 15 minutes at the end of the meeting. The group could review the meeting verbally or they could use a post-meeting reaction form to get their thoughts going.

If your group is having problems with infighting or competition, another form of the intervention agenda would be to set aside a whole meeting to discuss these problems. An agenda still needs to be developed to structure this type of meeting. For example, this kind of meeting might be spent exclusively on team building.

The third form of the intervention strategy can include a short lecture to the group as an item of the agenda. The content of this brief "in-service" training is usually about interpersonal process topics. Examples of content would be: a model of problem solving, how competition and cooperation affect group efficiency, or decision-making models. The lecture could also take the form of a "theory memo," that is, the adviser or leader could distribute an article that might help the group work on a problem it is having. Then the adviser or leader would set aside time on the agenda to discuss the memo.

Additional hints

- Distribute agendas to all members who are supposed to attend the meeting at least 24 hours in advance. If you meet infrequently (once a month or less), agendas should be delivered at least a week to three weeks prior to the meeting.
- Sending agendas to different levels of the organization, or other committees, which might be indirectly involved, can be a helpful communication tool. This will keep last minute surprises to a minimum.
- Put names of members who are responsible for a report on the agenda. It lets

them know they are responsible for that item.

- Most meetings are composed of operational or policy issues. Operational issues can be more tightly ordered because they are less complex. Policy issues, which also include goals, need to be dealt with in depth and therefore require more time.
- Agendas and meetings can be fun as well as efficient. Developing an agenda with a sense of humor can have your members standing in line to read the agenda!
- The content of agenda items should be gathered from a review of correspondence, past minutes and committee assignments, from organization or committee goals, and future events or plans. The leader will need to receive some of this information from organization members.

In summary, the perfect agenda is hard to find because organizations and leaders change. However, if the leader can develop the ability to use all of these methods and mix and match them to fit the organization, the quality of the agendas and the meetings will increase. The effective leader will probably use the formal and informal format as the basic agenda. The leader can then combine the other agenda development concepts, including prioritized, time, descriptive, and the intervention agenda into the formal or informal format. This combination can give group members the most opportunities to be involved and effective in meetings.

Although agenda development may not be thought of as an important part of the meeting, it is really the foundation of your meetings. The agenda's effectiveness will set the stage for a successful meeting because the time and thought which goes into preparation will increase the quality of your group's decision-making. Agenda development helps set the stage for successful meetings – and if you have successful meetings regularly, your organization's goals can be accomplished.

Selected Resources
Bradford, Leland P. *Making Meetings Work,* LaJolla, California: University Associates Publishers, 1976.
Lawson, John D., Leslie J. Griffin and Franklin D. Donant, *Leadership Is Everybody's Business.* San Luis Obispo; California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 1976.
Schein, Edgar, Process Consultation, *Its Role in Organization Development,* Reading, Massachusetts: Addision-Wesley, 1969.