



Five Tips for Executing a Successful Meeting

BY JONATHAN M. BUSCH

Increasing protests and disruptions on college and university campuses throughout the nation have made it very difficult, at times, for administrators to run effective and efficient meetings. An open meeting that is interrupted or disrupted by attendees can make it difficult for participants to conduct business, not to mention the fact that it can diminish the credibility of those running the meeting. It is essential that higher education administrators, including vice presidents for student affairs (VPSAs), approach open meetings with an eye toward careful preparation and respectful and fair treatment of all attendees. The following tips can help you achieve those goals.

1 Set and consider your agenda. It is imperative that a meeting agenda is developed before the meeting and that administrators “stick to it.” Consider in advance any red flags or topics that might be considered controversial or raise concern among meeting attendees, and carefully consider how to position those topics.

2 Follow your agenda. Meetings should always be run in the most orderly manner possible. A meeting chairperson who allows his or her meeting to wander from the agenda has lost control of the meeting. Thus, it is essential that each meeting address only those topics which appear in the agenda in the same order in which they appear. In this regard, most meetings employ some modified version of *Robert’s Rules of Order* to provide a general form of procedural guidance. Some administrators are not familiar enough with *Robert’s Rules* to control the debate and recover in the event that a disruption occurs. VPSAs and their peers may want to become more familiar with *Robert’s Rules* or, at a minimum, become as comfortable as possible with the gavel.

3 Strengthen your position. It can sometimes be difficult to conduct a meeting when members of the public are adversarial toward participants. As a result, it is imperative to plan ahead if there is chance that attendees may become hostile. For example, can the meeting room be arranged to strengthen the position of the meeting leader, either by setting seats on a stage or at the front of the room to create space between the meeting participants and attendees? Will a dais be necessary for the meeting body? Is there a way to better manage the public comment portion of meeting by setting reasonable

time limits in advance? Should a police representative or security officer attend the meeting? If so, should their roles be more or less prominent? Sometimes even the display of official décor, such as an institution’s school seal on a banner or flags in the room, can send signals about the formality of the meeting and the respect that should be demonstrated by meeting attendees.

4 Let the public speak. Nothing will cause an unruly crowd more frustration than a lack of opportunity to speak at a meeting. As a result, all open meetings should provide attendees with at least one opportunity for input, no matter the level of concern about possible comments. In doing so, it is essential that a strict but fair process be established for eliciting comments from students, staff, faculty, or other attendees. Under these circumstances, a time limit and “one comment per speaker” rule should be imposed. A timer with an alarm sound should be used so that each speaker knows when his or her time is up, which will diminish the appearance of trying to “cut them off.” If there is a particular position that you would like presented, consider soliciting an individual or group in advance of the meeting to speak about that position.

5 Keep calm. As an administrator, remember that it is your meeting, and you control the manner in which the meeting is conducted. However, control of the microphone is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. Frustration and condescension are easily detected in a person’s voice, which can be perceived by potential adversaries. As a result, stay calm and do not take comments or behaviors personally. Remember, the chairperson of the meeting has the right to end the meeting as soon as he or she deems it should be over.

Without violating any local open meeting or sunshine laws, consider working through anticipated issues with your colleagues and student affairs staff members in advance of the meeting. Like all meetings, the more preparation in advance, the greater the likelihood of success. ■

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