

## UNDERSTAND THE ART OF ENDING A MEETING

Afternoon shadows lengthen. The parking lot is nearly empty. A small group stands near one of the remaining cars. Voices are animated. “So what happens now?” asks one. “Who knows,” says another. “It’s the same old, same old — lots of talk, no action.” “Did you notice that no one brought up the problems with the new reporting protocols?” “Yes, the administration has no idea how much time and paper this costs.” “Who’s having trouble?” someone asks. “Our team likes the new process.” “That’s probably because of the (grade level or subject) you teach.” “Anyway,” says another person, “I’m still not clear what we’re supposed to do.”

If your group, like this one, spends much time in parking lot meetings, the right things probably are not being discussed in the formal meetings or they are not being talked about in the right way.

One aid to effective meetings that is rarely focused on is properly ending a meeting. Closing a meeting well requires as much purposefulness and art as opening a meeting. Just as openings have goals, so do endings. Thanking participants, summarizing, and asking for agenda items or leaders for the next meeting are valuable practices. Some other purposes are to:

- Understand agreements;
- Clarify who is to do what by when;
- Assess member satisfaction with the meeting;
- Test commitments; and
- Assess standards.

### UNDERSTAND MEETING AGREEMENTS

People hear, understand and remember agreements differently. (Ask your spouse.) Dissatisfaction is common in meetings in which members are not clear about which decisions were made, recommendations developed, and what is to occur next. When this happens, especially if it occurs repeatedly, the confusion does enormous damage to morale.

Even worse, it diminishes efficacy — the group’s sense that its work makes a difference. The group’s sense of effi-

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cacy has a high correlation to school and project success. As efficacy wanes, teachers are inclined to not work as hard, persevere less through challenging periods, and experience more stress in their work. Consider these options for helping group members understand meeting agreements:

**Leader summary.** The leader or facilitator summarizes decisions, recommendations, and other actions. Often this is the least effective option because the same gremlins that hindered members’ listening during the meeting may be at work at this time.

**Pairs review.** The leader or facilitator asks individuals to pair up to share what they understand about the meeting and then each pair shares to check for alignment with the group.

**Convenience store close.** The facilitator or leader has members imagine they are in a convenience store and encounter a colleague who wants to know what happened in the meeting. They mentally craft what they would tell this friend, then stand and deliver their summary to one other person. The facilitator calls on a few pairs to report their meeting summary from which corrections or refinements can be offered by the facilitator or group leader.

**Instant minutes.** Publish a meeting summary within 24 hours. Group members witness this and know their work is considered important.

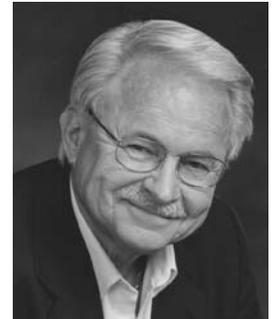
### WHO WILL DO WHAT BY WHEN?

A critical understanding at the end of meetings is clarity about next steps. As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to bring consciousness to this area. If the facilitator omits this task, a group member should act. Remember, it is the group’s group, never the facilitator’s or leader’s group. The strategy is simple:

Just before ending, the leader or facilitator asks, “Who will do what by when?” Silence often follows this question, since many times the actionable parts of decisions were not named. The leader then waits until the group sorts this out and names responsible persons and time frames.

### ASSESS MEMBER SATISFACTION

Satisfaction and effectiveness, while linked, are different concepts. Checking members’ satisfaction with meetings can be a springboard to revising and refining meeting



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about the challenges of creating effective groups. His columns can be found at [www.nsd.org/library/authors/garmston.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/garmston.cfm)

procedures. At least three versions for assessing satisfaction occur to me.

**Plusses and wishes.** The facilitator asks, “What are some plusses and wishes about this meeting?” The facilitator records responses on flip charts. For the next meeting, the facilitator resolves to maximize the plusses and address items in the wish category.

**Gots and wants.** The intent is similar to plusses and wishes, but ideas are recorded on sticky notes and posted on chart paper for those wishing to respond. Those who might be quiet during plusses and wishes can express their thoughts anonymously. Again, the data provide feedback from which improvements are made.

**Satisfiers and dissatisfiers.** This strategy can be used as an ending — or it could be the only item on an agenda. As a meeting closer, it provides data for the group to discuss group effectiveness at the next session. Because it links satisfaction to a specific goal, it focuses on effectiveness. The following example uses student learning as the goal.

The facilitator asks members to write what they find satisfying and unsatisfying about the impact of their meetings on student learning. One of at least two follow-ups might now occur at the next scheduled meeting:

1. A group dialogue based on the journal entries.
2. A structured activity based on the journal entries.

The facilitator uses a structured activity when the topic is complex or a need exists to maintain psychological safety during a conversation. One structured activity is “the final word.” Members pick one of their written statements for comment. Person A reads his or her selected statement. Each group member takes a turn responding to Person A’s statement. No side talk is allowed. When everyone but Person A has talked about the statement, Person A has the “final word” and elaborates on the statement read to the group. Now Person B reads a statement from his or her paper. The process continues around the table until time is exhausted or each person has offered an item.

### TEST COMMITMENT

The meeting is coming to an end. Each member has agreed to take certain actions as a result of this meeting. The facilitator says, “I know none of you would ever delib-

erately sabotage these agreements, but if you did, what would cause you to do so?”

Asked lightly and without incrimination, this question illuminates the misgivings members might have about implementation. Most agreement mutations are driven by positive intentions. Bringing these thoughts to the table allows practical conversation about implementation difficulties should they occur.

### ASSESS STANDARDS

Meetings improve when groups reflect about their work. Provide time and structures for group reflection. A simple and time-efficient way of improving meetings is to distribute a Likert scale questionnaire at the end of each meeting (Garmston & Wellman, 2002, p. 139).

Members rate each item from 1 to 5. Five standards most useful to meeting success (Garmston, 2002) are:

- Stay on only one topic at a time;
- Use only one process at a time;
- Ensure balanced participation;
- Promote conflict about ideas; and
- Understand and agree to meeting roles.

Members complete the form and hand it in as they exit the meeting. Prior to the next meeting, the facilitator or someone else the group designates organizes the data into a display that shows the distribution of responses. For the first 10 minutes of the next meeting, the group considers the question, “Given that this is what we said about ourselves last time, what do we want to work on today?” Surveying group members regularly pays high dividends. Most groups feel the tension of having more work to do than they have time, yet the only way to improve is through reflection. We do not learn from experience, only from reflecting on experience.

### REFERENCES

**Garmston, R. (2002, Winter).** The 5 principles of successful meetings. *Journal of Staff Development*, 23(1), 66-67.

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