ON LEADERSHIP

The Leader’s Challenge: Meetings, Spiritual Energy, and Sneaker Ratio

CONDUCTING MEETINGS is one of the most important roles of a leader. In professional practice environments, staff nurses lead informal, shared leadership, quality, task force, and ad hoc meetings. Nurse executives conduct unit, departmental, quality, multidisciplinary, and a wide variety of other kinds of formal and informal meetings. Meetings can inspire, or make everyone very tired. A common complaint of people in organizations is that meetings are useless, don’t feed the soul, and leave congregants tired, bored, and uninspired. Leaders can either inspire people in meetings or drain their energy. Because so much of the work of leaders must be done through meetings, how can they be more effective and successful?

The Sneaker Ratio

One way of measuring the success of meetings is “sneaker time” (Lencioni, 2004). After a meeting there often are post meetings, phone calls, e-mails, and discussions. Lencioni (2004) uses the term “sneaker time” to describe the amount of time that people spend roaming the halls after meetings to discuss unfinished issues that arise because of lack of clarity and closure in meetings. Dysfunctional meetings create a much higher sneaker-to-meeting ratio than effective ones. When meetings are useful, and real work gets done, there is less sneaker time. The more difficult the meeting, the more sneaker time.

Improving the Meeting-to-Sneaker Ratio

In the best of all possible worlds, the work of the group gets done in the meeting and people are free to do other work after the meeting. Four suggestions should work for any leader: (a) use the first few minutes to jolt everyone into attending to the meeting, (b) communicate with storytelling, (c) mine for conflict during the meeting, and (d) advocate for the audience.

Executive Summary

- Leaders can either inspire people in meetings or drain their energy.
- Leaders who inspire are affirming to everyone in the meeting. They create the environment that meets the needs of the people first, not the leader’s needs.
- Strategies for leading a successful meeting include: apply an opening jolt, communicate with storytelling, mine for conflict, and advocate for the audience.
Start with a jolt. People are looking for a reason to care and believe in a mission when they come to meetings (Lencioni, 2004). Leaders must provide people with that belief and reason for caring. Conduct meetings as a movie (Lencioni, 2004). In the first few minutes, jolt the audience with a dramatic opening that will hook them into attending. A sudden jolt quickly separates the people from what they were doing before the meeting and connects them with the current event. A sudden jolt that affirms every person in the room and creates an environment of caring and trust will set the tone and culture of the meeting.

At Clarian Health Partners, meetings begin with the reading of an exemplar that nurses advancing to partner and senior partner submit for evaluation for their promotion. The beauty of these stories and the demonstration of exquisitely advanced clinical skills with patients and families often creates many tears and feelings of profound inspiration which is the jolt that reminds us why we chose nursing. It’s a good way to start a meeting. Talking in stories is a much faster way to people’s hearts and minds (Walton, 2003).

Communicate with stories. Walton (2003) discusses Aristotle’s view that it is impossible to think without a mental model. The best way to communicate is with the basic language of storytelling that becomes a compelling and intriguing movie. Strategic stories will capture people’s attention and hearts if told in the right way. Strategic stories that provide a jolt and a hook in the first few minutes are sound techniques to guarantee a good kickoff.

Stories that express the desired result of the meeting, or an analogy told to awake interest in a given topic, can engage the audience. Stories can tell the technical as well as the soft and emotional aspects of an issue, which will create the model for how people can engage in dialogue about the issue.

Mine for conflict. Perhaps the greatest factor in increasing sneaker time is the number of issues that are not discussed openly in the meeting. Lencioni (2004) advises to “mine for conflict” during the meeting so that relevant issues surface now and reduce sneaker time later. Most cultures value harmony over dissent. In many meetings there are issues which the group has determined undiscussable. This silencing of differing points of view creates a dearth of new ideas, and blocks information needed to manage. Negative emotions are fostered and build to destroy teams and relationships (Perlow, 2003). When issues are not discussed within the meeting, sneaker time increases. Tobias (2003), former CEO of Eli Lilly and Company, used the term “get the moose on the table” as a signal for people in meetings to speak openly and transparently. Effective leaders do not shy away from the messy issues and bring them forward as an opportunity for people to grow in their discovery about themselves and co-workers. Great leaders know that if they put the moose on the table, they are offering opportunities for everyone to grow, and to be inspired to a higher level of development.

Inspirational leaders can put the moose on the table in a loving way that engages the group in a process of discovery. Storytelling is one approach. For example, a leader might know that an undiscussable issue is that of the relationship between the nurses and a particular physician group. A loving “Let me tell a story of what I saw yesterday…” is a gentle way of getting the moose on the table.

Advocate for the audience. The best leaders see issues through the perspectives of the people attending the meeting. “Audience advocacy” is the term that Weissman (2003) has applied to this concept of leading through the eyes of others. The major building block for this approach is to tailor presentations to address the benefit of the member, or “What’s in it for you?” Leaders who believe their mission is to serve will automatically ask the question, “How can I serve and inspire this group of people in this meeting?” Unfortunately, many leaders call groups together to serve the leaders’ need to be heard rather than to listen to the needs of the people.

The simple thought, “How may I serve you?” is a wonderful way to let your audience know that you truly are their advocate, and are interested in what’s in it for them. Old-style leaders are motivated by the acquisition of power, territory, and attention. Inspired leaders are motivated by the opportunity to watch their colleagues grow and blossom because they believe in their people more than they believe in themselves. This is real advocacy.

Summary

Leaders who inspire are affirming to everyone in the meeting. They create the environment that meets the needs of the people first, not the leaders. People yearn to be heard, and to be engaged with their soul in genuine dialogue and engagement. If that doesn’t happen in the meeting, then they search for meaning and support of their soul elsewhere and sneaker time increases.

Leaders get from people what they give to them. If people in a meeting are given nothing, they in turn have nothing to give. If they truly feel they are served by the leader, they will give back much more than they receive.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. so aptly said: “Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.”

REFERENCES