

meetings, meetings

Do you enjoy meetings or dread them? I know a number of women leaders who dread chairing meetings, or feel inadequate as they face the prospect. I can remember one conversation I had with a woman who was going off to chair a PCC (Parochial Church Council) meeting. 'I hate PCCs', she said. I can remember wondering why. She seemed a confident enough woman. Why did she dislike chairing church meetings?

Women in leadership in the Church are likely to encounter three different kinds of meetings. First, there are church meetings like church councils, committees or task groups, and an annual church meeting. Then there are meetings you may be involved in as part of community involvement, and which you may or may not be chairing. These can range from a small group planning a lunch club to chairing the governors of the local school, to being church representative on a multi-agency community team, an inter-faith group or a multi-million pound regeneration planning team. Third, there are meetings which you are probably not chairing, but which you attend, which are within your diocese or church hierarchy, or some para-church organisation.

Some people have argued that committees are a male domain – because they stem from a work culture which until recently belonged to men. It is probably because many women are confused by the 'rules' of meetings and the way in which they are often conducted that they dislike meetings. Thus, to be effective in meetings as a woman leader ideally entails being aware of best business practice, but also being aware of how one can humanise and change meetings but still get the task achieved. As women increasingly move into leadership roles in all areas of life, old generalisations between 'male' and 'female' behaviour may well disappear, but it is still the case that often 'women are less confident about their own ideas. In debate they often follow rather than lead.' (Martha Lane Fox)

Chairing meetings

Being an effective chair takes good preparation and good communication and leadership skills. People will be happy to attend your meetings if the agenda is well planned and the meeting ends on time – and if they are well briefed beforehand and valued during the meeting. The culture of church meetings varies; in some churches people expect them to be focused and businesslike; in one church I blundered by trying to take that approach and finding that people wanted to come for a chat as much as for the meeting proper. Keeping the business short and allowing the 'glass of wine' culture to continue worked wonders for getting the business done *and* building good relationships!

Some hints on how to chair formal meetings well:

- Some preliminary questions: Do we need a meeting at all? And what is its purpose? Having a meeting costs, in time and travel. Do the benefits warrant the cost? Then, if it is within your power, is the meeting the right size, with the right people?
- Think about the people involved as whole people, and the social aspect. Depending on the kind of meeting: time for connecting, talking about how life is, sharing a meal together. How will this relate to the formal business?
- Provide an agenda in good time. Think beforehand about the best place to put contentious items.
- It may help to flag up which items are for information, which for discussion and which for decision.
- Allocate timings, especially if subjects are going to be introduced by different people.
- Do not allow AOB ('any other business').

- Ensure that chairs are arranged so that people can see each other. If a church council is so large that it has to sit in rows it is probably too large to be of any use.
- Start on time, and indicate what time you intend to end.
- Ensure that someone is taking minutes and noting action points, and that the minutes are written and distributed soon after the meeting.
- In church meetings, open with prayer, and pause for prayer at points during the meeting as appropriate.
- Adopt a supportive and encouraging manner, aiming to help people to contribute.
- Do not allow personal criticism or conflict between people, but do encourage conflict of ideas to emerge. If a subject is contentious, allow people to voice their views and feelings, and elicit comments from as many people as possible.
- Move to conclusions and decisions, rather than allowing discussion to go round in circles. Clarify and summarise each decision. It is sometimes helpful to have an item on the agenda for discussion at one meeting and for decision at the next.
- Allow time at the end of the meeting for brief discussion on how well the meeting went and what could be done better next time.
- Thank people for attending and for their contributions.
- If participants are exceptionally vocal or very quiet, have a word with them at another time, rather than drawing attention to it during the meeting. Sit *near* those who say too much and *opposite* those whom you want to say more.

Being a good participant

Some meetings may cause you anxiety. You find it hard to speak up, or you are not sure what you have to contribute. Or alternatively you may find it frustrating to sit through a badly chaired meeting. It's a good idea to try to always have something to say, even if it's only 'I agree with X'. Another technique can be to ask questions to seek clarification when appropriate. If the meeting seems to be dominated by forceful people, find the confidence to speak up; go with your instincts and don't worry too much about being right. We may not value our own opinions, but our views are as valid as anyone else's – and someone has invited us because they think we do have something to contribute.

Research on women and board meetings suggests that women make a difference to previously all-male meetings. Women bring different viewpoints and experiences, a totality of life experience, and dampen the testosterone. Any team with a mix is better than all-male – or all-female. 'Men tend to compete when they get together – act macho. Women say, "that's very interesting, but let's consider..." They have more finely tuned interpersonal skills'. (Quoted in *A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom*.) It is quite hard to be the only woman in a meeting, so if you find yourself in this position, it may be worth trying to negotiate for another woman to be invited.

How to make your mark in meetings:

- When you are invited, find out as much as possible about the background and purpose of the meeting.
- Talk to others during coffee or lunch breaks, and get to know them. Take an interest in them – and find out where they are 'coming from'. This will help if it's the kind of meeting where you need 'allies'.
- Read the papers in advance, and be prepared to make a contribution. If it's a large meeting, others will expect you to take your time before making a contribution, and only to speak when you have something significant to say. Sometimes you'll be taken more seriously that way than if you have to say something about every item.

Some leaders say things like 'If I didn't have to go to meetings, I'd like my job a lot more.' But as Patrick Lencioni points out, that is like a surgeon saying to a nurse, 'If I didn't have to operate on people, I might actually like this job!' Meetings are central to what leaders do, especially those

leaders who regard teamwork as important. Meetings don't have to be tedious and painful, but can be productive and energising. And it's up to the leader to make the difference!

Resources

How to chair meetings A5.

A purpose statement for those who chair TN13.

Two excellent practical resources by John Truscott, available on www.john-truscott.co.uk.

Patrick Lencioni, *Death by Meeting: a leadership fable* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Some excellent and useful insights, using an intriguing 'fable' approach, which can be applied to churches and Christian organisations. Lencioni is the author of several business books, including *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.

www.meetings.org: a comprehensive guide to (business) meetings, with articles on a variety of aspects of meetings, many of which would also relate to a church context.

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