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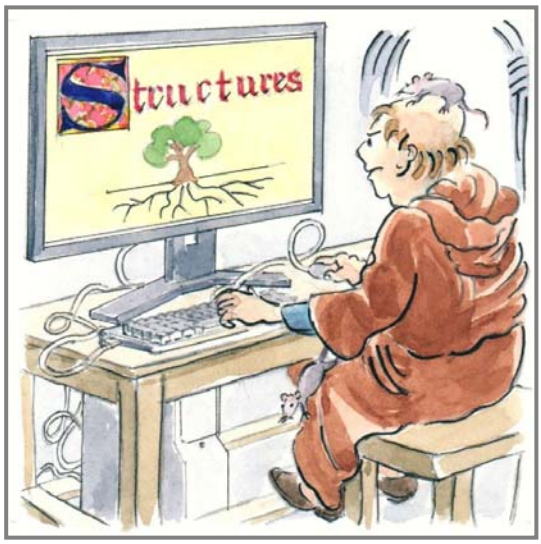

A purpose statement for those who chair

TN13 Training Notes series: Structures

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It is not an easy task to chair a meeting. Some who do so have little overall idea of what they are supposed to be doing. Here are five ideas to form a purpose statement for anyone who chairs a church or mission agency business meeting. For more detailed advice, see Article A5 on this website.

C.H.A.I.R.

The person in the chair is responsible for:

1 **C**larity
2 **H**armony
3 **A**greement
4 **I**nvolvement
5 **R**eview

You will not go far wrong if you keep these five words in mind next time you sit in that chair. To help you remember them, note the mnemonic!

1 Clarity

Many meetings take place in a fog. The person who chairs should be responsible for helping everyone know:

- why this group has been set up and what its aims are for this year;
- what they are trying to achieve in this item (eg. is it for information, discussion, decision, or all three?);
- where they have got to on a particular item (especially if they seem to be losing the plot).

Here are some examples of someone bringing clarity.

- **Introduction**
  "Next is the Harvest weekend. Pete and Zoe are suggesting that we do things differently this year and focus on our mission contacts in South America. Our aim is to study their paper together, and then first decide whether to accept it or amend it in some way, and secondly agree a budget. Is that OK?"

- **Summary**
  "Let's sum up the discussion so far. As I see it, there is a great deal of enthusiasm for the basic idea that Pete and Zoe have given us. That's fine. But while some want a full weekend with a major event on the Saturday night as well as a Sunday lunch, others feel that this might be too ambitious. They say we would be better to go for just the lunch and try to get everyone to stay for it. Is that a fair reading of where we are?"

- **Boundaries**
  "Bob, I fully agree that someone needs to plan the interviews at the weekend, but that's the job of the two Mission Co-ordinators. Our role, you will remember, is to authorise the overall programme and the budget – then we can leave the details to them."

2 Harmony

Note that the word is 'harmony' not 'unison'. There is no point in having a group to meet if they all see things the same way and agree on everything. You only need a meeting of one for that – and you could save hours of people-time in the process.

No, the value of a good meeting is in the variety of the views and backgrounds of the people. It should be a symphony, neither a cacophony where everyone plays whatever tune they like, nor a concerto where one player stars and the rest support!

Among many other things, you can only achieve harmony if people:

- understand the business to be done;
- respect the leadership of the person in the chair;
- listen to and trust each other.

The person chairing needs to help people see others' points of view. This indicates an understanding of each other. This cannot happen if people only come across each other in a business setting, especially if that setting is a weekday evening after a tiring day at work or looking after a family. There is a need to create a sense of teamwork, and this calls for time to be together outside the tension of a meeting.

3 Agreement

People meet to take decisions and plan action. A good business meeting is likely to be future-directed in all its thinking: reports from the past and analysis of the present are both 'means' to the 'end' of taking action for the future. This is what should give a meeting its cutting edge: it is a forum for moving ahead, for developing, for the future. Reports, discussion, group-work are all 'means' towards the 'end' of decisions.

One of the key roles of the person in the chair is to help the meeting do just this. So if you are chairing, your mind is always on bringing people on to the point where a decision can be made. Do it too quickly and people feel cheated. Do it too slowly and many feel frustrated. The judgment of the right pace is one that comes with experience, but it is not easy even with a group you know well.

- **Use lists**

  When the dynamic moves from general discussion towards decision-making, it does no harm to sharpen up the meeting. Listing possibilities is one way of doing this (and having a flip-chart available is very valuable). If the situation is more complex than this, the person chairing may need to clarify the various options. Then list points for and against.

- **Ensure adequate information**

  Rather too frequently a group meets to take an important decision only to discover that they do not have the necessary data. The tenders for the new roof are in fact in different forms and cannot easily be compared. Or there are ambiguities in one of them that a phone call in time could have sorted out. If the person chairing has no idea of how the decision is going to be made, it is very unlikely that the meeting will be a satisfactory experience.

- **Plan action**

  So you have agreed what to do – but you also need to agree the process to get there. This may involve who is to be responsible, or what is the next step to be taken. You fail in the chair if you move on to the next item having decided to go for roof tender No. 2 when it is not clear who is now going to contact each contractor and how the work moves on from here.

One more point to have in the back of your mind. The comments you want people to make after the meeting go along the lines of "We agreed to…." and not "He/she got us to agree to …"

4 Involvement

Bring everyone in …

I have a theory that states that the wisdom of a committee member is inversely proportional to the number of words they offer to speak at the meetings. Those who chair need to be proactive in bringing everyone in. This calls for sensitivity in handling quieter members and firmness in dealing with the zealous talkers. Moving into small groups for ten minutes is a brilliant technique. If someone on a committee says nothing for a meeting, I have questions about the competence of the person chairing rather than questions about whether the quiet person should be on the group or not.

… but manage the time carefully

The person who chairs needs to keep a careful eye on the time, without others being aware of this. There will always be an item that throws up unforeseen points and merits a longer time than you planned. So be ready to take decisions on cutting other items out, or delegating some business to other groups.

5 Review

This is a responsibility that may surprise you. It has not been popped in to provide an R for my mnemonic! It is included because this is a vital part of the work of any group that want to improve their meetings. It is an issue of PROCESS rather than BUSINESS. More attention paid to process would pay dividends in your business.

Here are some ideas of how you can review to improve group performance at meetings.

Review each meeting

You can try this for five minutes at the end of a meeting, but it might be wiser to spend five minutes at the start of the next one.

The person chairing might ask:

- What was good about the way we did our business last time?
- What needs to be improved about the way we did our business last time?
- Are there one or two lessons we could learn and put into practice this time?

Of course the person chairing needs to be vulnerable in this for some of the criticisms will probably relate to the way the meeting was run.

Review of a series of meetings

This might be an annual review.

- What have we achieved this year?
- Where have we failed this year?
- What have we enjoyed about our meetings?
- What has frustrated us?
- What practical actions do we need to take for next year?

If the person chairing feels this is asking for trouble, it might be done by a smaller group working with the person who chairs, perhaps asking for input from the whole group.

If I am training people to chair specifically Christian meetings, I add in other points about holding the meeting to its spiritual foundations (while being aware of the subtle dangers of using a veneer of spirituality to hide some rather nasty, underhand techniques). But the five points above would hold for any meeting.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes then TN13. They cover one aspect of a possible training event for those who chair business meetings in churches or mission agencies. See Article A5, *How to chair meetings*, for a fuller treatment of chairing and Training Notes TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, for advice on agendas. Check out the Structures page in the Resources section of the website for more items on meetings.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running a training event on meetings for you.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN13 under Structures.

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