



FireOpsOnline.com

Your Online Resource for Free Fire Training, Drills, and Tips

FEATURED ARTICLE

Conducting Effective Meetings

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

The word ‘effective’ is the key when it comes to conducting meetings. Most organizations in America hold more meetings than necessary. Those meetings are also much longer than they need to be and not well organized or prepared. As important as meetings are to your department, if done incorrectly, they will prove to be nothing more than a practical alternative to work. Gathering a group of people and having a meeting without an agenda is like staffing a fire engine after a call comes in and pulling out of the firehouse without any clue as to what your destination is going to be.

Great companies recognize the value of getting input from every member on their team, from the newest recruits and talent to the most senior officers and managers. Take a moment to consider the fact that the newest members on your department may have the most fresh and unique ideas. Sometimes those of us who have been around for a while are creatures of habit. Brainstorming solutions by gathering the input of all those affected by your decision will give you an edge and help everyone involved to buy into the process of whatever it is you are trying to accomplish. When your entire team is sold on an idea that they helped conceive, it has a substantially better chance of working.

Use a meeting agenda. This will enable you to keep the meeting on schedule, allow the team to prioritize items of concern, and provide for structure so that no members monopolize your time by getting off track with their thoughts and comments. Also, keep your meetings short and stay focused on the reason why you are there. Nothing is worse than attending a staff meeting that goes an hour longer than it needed to and confuses everyone who was in attendance because there was no structure or development of a game plan. When scheduling a meeting, only invite those who are necessary. If you are addressing issues that concern only a portion of your department, such as the Captains and Lieutenants, the attendance of firefighters may hinder your ability to accomplish your overall goal and result in the meeting getting off track. Furthermore, those members could be out accomplishing other tasks and producing while the meeting is in session.



Here are a few surefire strategies to shortening your meetings to help ensure they are more effective.

1. **Start on time.** When it comes to meetings, live by the statement, don't punish the punctual. The day you begin to start meeting 5, 10 or 15 minutes late is the day you say to your team... it's okay if you're late, we'll wait for you. The byproduct of late meetings is a lackadaisical attitude that will carry over into other areas of performance, or lack thereof. When a colleague of mine took over his tour, he shared a great story with me. He said he told his team that he would be having monthly meetings where they could get together and discuss important and relevant issues. The first meeting he scheduled came with a surprise; one of his officers was fifteen minutes late. Instead of waiting, he locked his office door and started the meeting with the ones who were on time. When that officer knocked, he told him the meeting was already in progress and he'd have to wait until next month's meeting to join them. Neither he, nor anyone else, was ever late again. Although he admitted to me this was uncomfortable for him to do, he certainly made his point.
2. **Don't sit down.** I remember talking with a friend who was thrilled to finally get a meeting with one of the wealthiest millionaires in Boston. He wanted to pitch his services, so he worked day and night for three weeks to craft the "perfect" presentation. As the assistant walked him into the meeting room he was thrown off when he noticed that the large board room had a table but no chairs. The multi-millionaire entered the room, introduced himself, shook my friend's hand and said, "You have five minutes, tell me what brings you here." My friend later found out this is how the man did business. Quick and to the point. When I bring my tour together for a meeting, I'm fine with them getting comfortable, but I like to stay on my feet, because it's a constant reminder that I have only a short amount of time to get to the task at hand. The more comfortable I make myself, the more off track the meeting tends to go.
3. **Be prepared.** Okay, this one may be a bit obvious, but sometimes common sense is not common practice. If you are going to bring your team together for a meeting, take time out of your busy schedule to prepare. If you don't develop an agenda, the meeting will come across as unorganized and you will begin to lose credibility as a team leader. On the other side of the coin, the other attendees need to do their homework in advance as well. If I'm going to pull a team of firefighters together for a meeting on how we can better tackle wildland-urban interface fires, I'll let them know what the area of concern is going to be before the meeting so they can come in with some ideas. If you want to talk about improving customer relations, let your team know in advance so they can come to the meeting prepared with possible solutions.
4. **Be clear and specific.** When an Engine Company arrives on the fire scene, they walk up to the Incident Commander and ask, "What do you need, Chief?" The IC has about ten seconds to tell that Company Officer what he wants accomplished. There's no time to waste or hesitate. It's a clear, specific directive, based on goals and objectives. A team meeting should not be this one sided, but it does need to be based on specific goals and objections, which should be clearly stated at the beginning of the meeting. You absolutely do want feedback and opinions from the others in the room, but you will achieve far more productive results when you establish a clear sense of direction and focus. Not to mention a more energized team because no time will be wasted talking about or pursuing work that isn't relevant.

5. **Stick to the agenda.** Only tackle topics you are prepared to handle. On the fireground my department uses a command board that includes a dry erase whiteboard where we can write down all relevant information. There is also a blank spot on the board that I use to jot down things that are relevant to our job as firefighters, but not relevant to the job we are currently working at. I call it a parking lot. It can be used as a space to write things down so you can clear your mind of any possible distractions and address them later. For example, one afternoon we had a major explosion at an electricity generating station in the industrial area of our town. The fire was significant and required a great deal of attention, but at that fire we realized we were lacking pre-plans of this and many other facilities in that area. I wrote the word pre-plan on the board and forgot about it until I was cleaning up. At that point, I wrote “pre-plan” down on a notepad and began to organize thoughts for a meeting that took place at a later date where we discussed this issue. The same concept can be used in a team meeting. If a concerning issue arises and you don’t have time to address it, document it in your parking lot and revisit it at a later date.
6. **Separate and subjugate.** Okay, this is just a fancy way to say divide and conquer. There will come times when some of the people in your meetings do not need to be there. If you run an engineering firm and you want to discuss how you could improve sales, your technical people don’t need to be in the room. The same could be said when you are discussing Engine company operations and Ladder company personnel are in the room. If you separate people into meetings that cover areas they need to be concerned with, you will be able to tackle the issues quickly and move on to your next task.
7. **Never end late.** Here it is in a nutshell. If you’re having a fifteen minute meeting, ten minutes in, let the other know you have five minutes left to accomplish your purpose of the meeting. I have attended 30 minute meeting and wondered – after ninety minutes – why we hadn’t even started to discuss the issues we were called in to discuss in the first place. This gave me the feeling that I was part of a disorganized team and working under an unfocused leader who didn’t respect the time of others.

No one wants to spend more time than they need to in unproductive meetings, and surely, you’d rather have your team spend their time where it is most productive... out training or accomplishing department goals. Shortening your meetings will play a big part in helping you stay focused and be effective as a fire service leader.

Remember: When the entire team is sold on an idea that they helped conceive, it has a substantially better chance of working.
