

# Briefing Article – Curam, August 2011

## Staff Meetings – getting them working....

*'At my staff meetings, AOB stands for Any Other Bazuka! ...not business at all!!!',* said one principal to me a while ago as we explored ways to make meetings more effective and less fraught.

There wasn't a staff meeting of any significance that I was chairing that I didn't learn something from...in how I did really well and from what I could have done a whole lot better. This is perhaps why I enjoy facilitating so much – it is utterly all consuming as I work with all the personalities, agendas, purposes and issues of any given group and try to move the participants forward and learn, learn, learn about how it is I do what it is I do.

We know we need them, we know for many they go well much of the time ... but we know that sometimes for a whole lot of reasons they are so much more difficult than they need to be - they can wear us all down, people can get very hurt, issues get avoided, various agendas are at play, resentments new and old get rehearsed, innovation and generosity can be trampled upon...so what can we do? This article gives an overview of the approaches and practices I come across working with schools up and down the country. I'm going to start with the obvious, with what we know goes into promoting good meetings and then move on to some of what I call 'bumps in the road' and then, in a second article, to explore what I term the 'meeting characters' we come across...

### What we know:

The core elements in promoting effective staff meetings can be summarised using the **3C&P's**:

**Consultation:** on what needs to be discussed at this meeting and how the process should be managed. So the key questions here are who should be involved and how ... awareness of controversial issues and stances...

**Preparation:** Especially before full staff meetings, preparatory work can be done to ensure the issues are clarified and refined, that relevant perspectives are taken account of, that roles and responsibilities are acknowledged .... Task groups and group preparation can save time and energy by outlining approaches to key issues and bringing forward relevant data and options...

**Communication:** this is the formal and informal pieces, giving proper notice and opportunities for quality contribution ... items on the agenda need to be clear, how items get onto an agenda need to be transparent ... who will be involved in presentations, proposals etc needs to be communicated...

**Process:** asking what is the best process that will give the best outcome for all concerned? – *presentation; group work; buzz sessions; a facilitator; rotating chair; focused issue meetings* ... recognising the status of the issues – some will be for information, others for discussion and others again for decision... this influences

what time is allocated and how to address the items... flexibility in process is a crucial means to promote effectiveness ...

**Commitment:** seeing through on decisions is a vital aspect to the credibility of meetings ... so always be clear how this is being achieved – *what is to be done, by who, by when etc...* and at future meetings give an update as this promotes confidence and an opportunity to review and improve as necessary – this also helps those who might be reluctant to go with a change as now they know there will be a meaningful review within a definite timeframe...

**Participation:** when asking people what they believe builds positive participation, these are the words they use: *trust, openness, constructiveness, responsibility, sensitivity, confidence, realism, transparency, respect* ... the right process will help good and wide participation as will honest engagement and constructive relationships...

There is much more we could add to the above but as a starting point, I believe the main building blocks are there. Now to look at some of the challenges...

### **Bumps in the road:**

I want to explore a few of the main 'bumps' that school leaders talk to me about and how they have responded. Hopefully this will spark ideas and reflections about your own approach and context. The first bump is what I term the:

**Amber Light** – the warning that it may not be safe to go forward - check around you and move quickly! Our antennae as leaders are always alert to the moods, the morale, the stresses, the agendas and the issues that are current. If it becomes clear that the upcoming staff meeting is going to be much more controversial than anticipated then action is required to discover – why and what needs to be done to effectively address the issues raised. Many leaders have said that this work has saved them many an unnecessary 'outburst' at a staff meeting. Going into a 'bubble' and saying I'm not going to pander to this or that mood or agenda is to miss the point of leading 'with others' – everyone needs to be engaged with where they find themselves.

**Here's one I prepared earlier** – if it can go wrong at some stage it probably will - so have a plan in your back pocket for when the meeting goes off the rails. While experience and good patient judgement are the most effective tools in a crisis, having a broad agreed outline of what will happen when a meeting goes badly wrong can help everyone. The most effective practice I have found is that of the agreement reached by staff and management of what will happen when meetings go astray – there are options to take a timeout, a deferral, a subgroup to represent issues, a change of meeting process, a facilitator. The saving grace here is that a mechanism has been put in place in the calm of ordinary business that is not hastily put together in the heat of divisive debate.

**If it's not you – then it might be me!** –Those leaders who can hold up their hands and say: *'I got that wrong'; 'I overreacted'; 'I unfairly pushed that through'; 'I didn't take enough cognisance of this or that view'...*are opening, in most contexts, an opportunity for greater honesty, credibility and engagement. Who

tells you the truth? Who can you listen to, respect and engage with even if their view is utterly contrary to yours? Who do you trust to let you know where you need to review your performance, your contribution and your approach? These are the most precious of people – find them, cherish them and hold onto them for dear life!

**Is it nature or nurture – process or product?** – we can get consumed by the end game, the resolution, the decision, the action and not pay attention to how we get there, what might make it a *better* outcome and not just an outcome – thus the product/process debate in leadership. As leaders we are usually good at getting things done, that's often how we got into the post. Leading 'with' effectively often means slowing down, taking a longer view and giving time for consultation. The value is not that we get 'our' way but it just takes a bit longer - rather that in the process we find a *better* outcome that is more sustainable, with more people committed to it. Spending time on good, relevant process really can make the 'product'/outcome better.

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In part two of this article I will explore some of the most common 'meeting characters' such as ***the Hijacker; the Martyr; the Blocker; the Technocrat and the Wise Owl*** – and how they can be worked with effectively. Also I would be delighted to respond to any reflections on this first article and welcome any feedback to build our capacities in working well with others...please forward your comments to [imonahan@curam.ie](mailto:imonahan@curam.ie)

*Luke Monahan is a founding partner of Curam – an independent resource to all sectors of Irish education. Curam, with the support of NAPD, is running a series of professional development seminars on a range of topics - visit [www.curam.ie](http://www.curam.ie) and the seminar tab for updated information.*