

10 Secrets to Great Meetings

There's No Reason for Them to be Long and Boring

by Elizabeth Blackwell

A Lion for 17 years, David Wentworth has sat through a meeting or two that lacked sizzle. “As Lions, we run on meetings,” says Wentworth, 44, a vice president of marketing and a member of the Millard Lions Club in Omaha, Nebraska. “We have a meeting to find out when we’re going to have our next meeting.”

When’s the last time you jumped up out of your seat, thrilled at the thought of attending another meeting? Whether at work or through volunteer activities, we’ve all been subjected to dull meetings that ramble on pointlessly, leaving us both exhausted and irritated. It’s no wonder we make fun of them.

But meetings may be literally a life or death matter for Lions clubs. Long, boring meetings are a primary reason that half of new members drop out within three years.

The best meetings not only get projects accomplished but they also motivate members to become more involved. “If we fix our meetings,” Wentworth says, “it will have a direct impact on retention.”

But how do you liven up a dull meeting? Based on real-life experiences, here is how Lions keep their meetings fresh, effective, and—best of all—fun.

1. Plan the Mission

The best meetings actually start days before the scheduled time. That’s when the leader should determine the meeting’s purpose. Meeting just for the sake of meeting is not enough—you need to have a goal, something concrete you want to accomplish by the end.

Once the goal is determined, the leader needs to share it with the members, so they can arrive prepared to discuss the issues at hand. That’s why it’s so important to prepare an agenda in advance: it’s the road map that keeps the whole event on track.

“At 75 percent of meetings, someone grabs the last meeting’s agenda, makes some changes, and thinks about it for five minutes before the meeting starts,” says Wentworth. The result? Boring meetings that sound like reruns of the month before.

“Everyone should know what we want to accomplish,” says Esther LaMothe, 61, a retired educational consultant and member of the Jackson Eyeopeners Lions Club in Michigan. A Lion for 12 years, she is a former district governor and serves on the faculty of Lions International Leadership Development programs. “I send out an agenda at least 72 hours in advance by e-mail, and ask everyone to come in with ideas and be ready to work on them.”

If members have an issue they want discussed, they should ask that it be added to the

agenda in advance, rather than interrupting the flow of the meeting with unrelated topics. “I tell people to get hold of me two days before the meeting, and ask that their issue be added to the agenda,” Wentworth says. “If it’s really important to you, you’ll find the time to discuss it beforehand.”

2. Start On Time

It seems like basic common sense, but far too many meetings get dragged out by small talk before they’ve even started. It’s a self-destructive cycle: if your meetings have a reputation for starting late, members will stop showing up on time, pushing your start time even later.

Beginning promptly signals to members that you respect their busy schedules. Unlike office workers who are paid to attend dull meetings, Lions are volunteers. If you’re asking them to give up their free time, it had better be worth their while. “If we’re trying to get younger people to join,” says LaMothe, “they’re often coming right after work. They have family responsibilities and other priorities. You should honor the fact they’re giving up their time to come and help.” Starting a meeting on time shows new members that you won’t waste their time.

3. Keep It Moving

Marshall Brence, 52, of the Poteau Evening Lions Club in Oklahoma, has sat through his share of frustrating meetings: a Lion since 1989, he was the MD 3 Leadership Development Chairman for 10 years before recently taking on the role of MD 3 MERL Team Coordinator. But he’s always remembered one meeting he attended at a small club in Oklahoma: “They wanted to argue for 45 minutes about a pair of glasses. I found out later they’d been having the same argument for six weeks.”

We’ve all sat through meetings that suddenly ground to a halt, thanks to members who rambled on too long. Think of your meeting as a journey that needs to constantly move forward. Effective clubs enforce their agenda: if a topic is not listed, it doesn’t get discussed.

“Too many times you go over the same ground,” says Donna Coulter, 64, a retired office administrator who is immediate past president of the Grande Prairie Lions Club in Alberta, Canada. Involved in Lions since 1971, she is a past district governor and is on the Planning Committee for the 2008 USA/Canada Lions Leadership Forum. “You have to make a decision and live by your decisions,” she says.

Too often, members are simply afraid of making decisions. It’s up to both the leadership and members to insist that an issue be resolved in a meeting rather than appearing on the agenda over and over again.

4. Motivate the Membership

While the club president might be the one running a meeting, members share the responsibility for making it work. But how do you get them to show up—let alone care about what’s going on?

The key is to get them invested in what the club is doing. For that, Marshall Brence suggests yearly brainstorming sessions, an experience that revived his club.

“We started off asking, ‘What’s the worst thing about our meetings, and what are we going to do about it?’ ” he says. “We didn’t blame anyone or talk about what the current officers did or didn’t do. Instead, the question was, ‘What do we expect?’ Not just from our officers, but from our members? It brought the whole membership together to say, ‘This is my club.’ It helped us have a purpose.”

Such sessions can be watershed moments for a club. Once you’ve got members who care, and feel that their input is valued, they’ll not only show up at meetings—they’ll have a revived enthusiasm for Lions clubs.

5. Reward Attendance

Even if members feel invested in their club, you have to make it worth their while to show up at meetings. How?

Sometimes it’s as simple as bribery: some clubs ask everyone to put a dollar in a pot, then raffle off half the take at the end of the evening. But the rewards don’t have to be financial. Make sure each meeting offers something of value to members, whether it’s an interesting program, a good meal, or news about how a successful project has helped your community. You’ll soon see the difference between members who show up out of guilt or obligation, and those who come because they actually want to be there.

6. Break Up Routines

Ever feel like your meetings are something out of the movie *Groundhog Day*, with the same people, sitting in the same places, complaining about the same things, over and over and over again? It’s up to both the person leading the meeting and the people attending to keep each meeting fresh—and not just by changing the agenda.

Cliques are a fact of life at most clubs, but breaking them up can breathe new life into your get-togethers. “At almost every meeting, we try to come up with new ways of seating people,” says Wentworth. At one meeting, he placed the numbers 1 through 6 at each place setting. Once the members were seated—with the usual cliques at their usual tables—he told everyone that they would have to move: all the people sitting in front of a number 1 would sit at one table, all the 2’s at another table, and so on. That got everyone talking to members they had never sat with before.

At the next meeting, a group of friends all sat in front of the number 1 at different tables, thinking they’d be moved together. Wentworth’s solution? He told everyone that this time, they’d stay where they were—and the clique remained separated.

Another way to break up seating patterns is to give each table a theme, then ask everyone to pick themes from a hat or bag as they arrive. At every meeting, you’ll have a different mix of people at each table, giving each get-together a new dynamic.

Coulter's club in Alberta regularly invites members from other clubs to their meetings. "We do joint projects in the community, which builds camaraderie, increases the size of our meetings, and gets more members coming," she says.

7. Get Everyone Talking

Variety is the key to keeping members engaged. Nothing is more dull than hearing the president talk, then talk some more, then keep talking. To keep everyone interested and motivated, find ways to get members involved. Not only will it make the meeting more interesting, it will make each person feel that their input is valued.

Brence's club added a feature they call Biography to every meeting: each member is assigned a week during the year when they must get up and talk about themselves, their family, their business—whatever they want to share. "We found out about a lot of cool hobbies that way," he says. "We also learned that one of our members was a cancer survivor. Later, when another member was diagnosed with cancer, he had someone to talk to who had been through it."

Coulter includes time for a roundtable discussion at the end of every club meeting she leads. "I ask each member if there's anything they want to share or ask. Going person to person controls the flow of the discussion, and it shows them you're interested in their concerns. As president, it helps me get to know the members better. I also ask what they'd like added to the next agenda, which saves me time at the next meeting."

How do you encourage member input without getting bogged down in long-winded discussions? At Wentworth's club in Omaha, whoever wants to speak must stand up. "First," he says, "it helps them to be heard. But it also makes the speaker think about what he or she is going to say. If it's not important enough to stand for, it's not important enough for the meeting. That saves us a lot of wasted time."

8. Have Fun

Even the strictest agenda should leave time for socializing, which is often the highlight for many members. Mike Mixer, an attorney and president of El Cajon Valley Lions Club in California, says Happy Dollars and fines are the best part of his club's meetings. "We try to go through the calendar items and reports quickly, to make as much time as possible for that," he says. "It gives everyone a chance to get their digs in, or get up and boast, and lots of people enjoy that. For us, the heart of the meeting is finding out what people are doing."

A good Tail Twister can add that sense of fun to the meeting, but make sure the joking and ribbing don't take over the meeting. "The Tail Twister should be listed on the agenda with a limited amount of time, like any other agenda item," suggests LaMothe. Every club tolerates its own level of silliness, but members and leaders should know when to say enough. "Some things we like to joke about," says Brence, "but when we have a guest, we don't want to look like a bunch of junior high kids."

9. End on a Positive Note

Ever seen a movie or read a book that started off great, only to fall flat at the end? Never underestimate the power of a good ending. If you want your members to walk out feeling good about your meeting, you've got to finish it right.

"You have to wrap up your story," says Wentworth. If you've start a meeting by determining its purpose, end the meeting by telling members how you accomplished that goal. Summarize what was decided, and talk about what's coming up for the club in the future. The goal should always be for members to leave on a positive note.

10. Meet Between Meetings

Ideally, your club meetings shouldn't be the only time you talk to fellow Lions. For club leaders especially, it's crucial to stay in touch informally, via phone or e-mail. As club president, Coulter called or sent a note to any member going through a life change, whether it's a new job or a spouse's illness. "It all flows together," she says. "If we show members someone cares about them, they're more likely to show up at meetings later."

If members leave your club meetings knowing something got done—and that their input was valued—they'll not only think better of your club, they'll have a more positive view of Lions clubs as a whole. And that's why meetings are no joking matter.