Teaching Meeting Skills in the Classroom

Constantine A. Ciesielski
East Carolina University

Abstract

The goal of a Construction Management curriculum is to prepare men and women to be marketable and productive to future employers. In addition to formalized core and cognate courses, there is a need to equip graduates with appropriate soft skills including communications. In particular, conducting effective meetings plays a significant role in construction management.

Learning how to conduct effective meetings requires more than book reading and knowing the “rules”; practice and example are paramount. College professors hold a unique position in being able to teach “meeting skills” to their students through good example in the classroom. After all, a classroom session is really an instructional meeting, one of the five types of meetings addressed in this paper. The instructor’s continued example of holding effective classroom meetings should help the student learn the principles of conducting effective meetings.

Introduction

Management functions are often identified using five basic responsibilities: planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling. Most construction management degree programs in the United States address these responsibilities or management functions by requiring courses in planning, scheduling, estimating, codes, contracts, and other basic construction sciences to prepare graduates for contributory roles in the industry. However, studies have shown that there are skills needed by the industry not covered by these basic courses. Communications skills are among these.

Communications in construction management takes on various forms. One form of communications, meetings, plays a key role in getting work done. For a construction project, meetings begin early on in the conceptualization, feasibility, and design phases of a project. They continue through construction for progress reporting, coordination and resolution of special issues. Even after construction is over, meetings continue for such things as project close out and turn over, dispute resolution, and “Lessons Learned” meetings.

Meetings are all too often looked upon by attendees and outside observers as a waste of time, and many of them are. We must teach people how to conduct effective meetings. This paper addresses several types of meetings held in the industry, the reasons for poor meetings, and methods for making meetings more
productive. Principals discussed throughout the paper can be “taught” to students by the example his/her professor exhibits in the classroom.

**Meetings**

In order to conduct an effective meeting, one has to know what a meeting is and why it is needed. What is a meeting? A meeting is a bringing together of individuals having some mutual interest to accomplish an objective. It usually consists of some discussion under the control of some leadership. Why call a meeting? There are several reasons for calling a meeting including planning, informing, building cooperation, gaining commitment, providing involvement, solving problems, training, reducing errors, clarifying, and showing support among other reasons. Basically, all meetings can be organized into five categories based on purpose of the meeting. These categories are:

1. Instructional,
2. Informational,
3. Developmental,
4. Soliciting Opinions, and
5. Reconciliatory.

Depending on the purpose of the meeting, either a traditional format or an interactive format may be selected for use. The traditional meeting format is one wherein the meeting leader orchestrates the proceedings in a relatively structured manner. Alternatively, the interactive type meeting is one in which no one person is in the traditional leadership role. In this type meeting, usually a facilitator and a recorder are the key people with the manager/chairperson playing a participatory role within the group. Everyone has a stake in the outcome and is equally responsible for the group’s success.

In **Instructional meetings**, the meeting leader lectures and the group absorbs the material. There is little or no opportunity for discussion or expression of individual opinions. The effectiveness of this type meeting depends on the intelligence and interest of the group, the timing, and the skill and personality of the speaker. **Informational meetings** are used to present information. After the information is presented a discussion period can be held to expand and clarify ideas.

**Developmental meetings** are called to develop policy, practice or procedure. Group members offer suggestions, ideas, facts and opinions that are weighed and considered by the entire group and a decision is reached. Some meetings are held to **Solicit Opinions. In** these meetings the leader establishes the purpose of the meeting and accepts opinions offered by the attendees to enable someone in authority to arrive at a conclusion and make a decision.

With regard to **Reconciliation meetings the** leader takes the position of umpire or referee with two separate factions presenting their side of the case. Opinions are freely expressed with little or no control by the leader until it is deemed advisable to sum up the meeting and arrive at a conclusion.

**Factors Affecting The Productivity of Meetings**

Let us consider the impact of four fundamental elements that effect the productivity of a meeting: 1) Setting Objectives, 2) Planning, 3) Control, and 4) Closure.
Setting Objectives

There is a saying attributed to Yogi Berra that goes something like “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’re liable to end up somewhere else”. Meeting objectives that are not clear to the meeting leader will not be clear to the participants. Distribution of a well thought out agenda prior to the beginning of the meeting provides information on the meeting’s objective and what kind of preparation is to be done by the participants.

Planning

One should plan a meeting based on the objectives identified for the meeting. Planning includes the development and distribution of an agenda, selecting the appropriate participants, reserving the meeting room considering requirements for space, lighting, and visual aids. It is very important to get the agenda to participants well in advance of the meeting.

Advance mental preparation for the meeting gives the meeting leader an advantage in controlling the meeting. Participants should be advised beforehand to plan for the meeting, to be willing to contribute ideas to the discussion, and to listen to the other participants’ ideas. The meeting leader may want to inform participants how they will be expected to contribute to the meetings success. For example, remind them that they should understand why they are attending, to arrive on time for the meeting, to be courteous and alert, to listen carefully and contribute to the ideas and views of others, to maintain an objective attitude and avoid emotionalism, to avoid both domination of discussions and conducting side conversations, to avoid sarcasm and ridicule, and to help the leader maintain order.

Control

Control is essential during the meeting. Participants can get off track, argue among themselves, argue with the leader, and hold side conversations. They may feel intimidated or inhibited about expressing their true feelings or opinions. They should not be embarrassed or ridiculed by the leader. Participants may become confused and loose sight of the objective. They may loose interest. All of these incidents must be avoided or kept to a minimum with proper control being exercised by the meeting leader.

Interruptions to meetings should be minimized by prior planning and by instructions to participants and associates regarding the importance of the non-interrupted flow of the meeting. Wherever possible, allow no interruptions except for a clear emergency. Hold messages for delivery at coffee breaks and lunch time. Holding the meeting outside of and away from normal operating facilities will help minimize external interruptions.

The meeting leader controls the meeting. He/she should state early on the objective(s) of the meeting. The meeting leader should keep the meeting on track with the agenda. He/she should resist “hidden agenda” ploys. The meeting leader should keep discussions on track. It is very easy for meetings to be derailed by side issues. Whether a tangent discussion is being promoted by a subordinate or by a superior, respectful but clear interruption must be made by the meeting leader to bring the meeting back on track.

Closure

Failure to summarize conclusions and clearly identify action items is a common cause of nonproductive meetings. The best discussions and conclusions can be take place at a meeting but if there is no effective follow up, the effort has gone for very little. Action items must be summarized and must include
identification of responsible parties and disposition dates. Incomplete items and/or unfinished business should also be identified with suspense dates for action/disposition. Minutes must be taken during the meeting and these should include actions items. Conclusions and action items should be verbally summarized at the end of the meeting for all participants to hear. Failure to summarize conclusions and action items virtually destroys the time spent at the meeting and creates the need for another meeting to cover the very same topic(s).

**Control and Closure**

It has been this author’s experience that of the factors discussed above, poor control and closure are most often the causes of non-productive meetings. Planning and distribution of agendas for most meetings are normally adequately addressed. However, meeting control and closure either disintegrate or may never develop, and this of course leads to a poor meeting. Control and closure bear heavily upon the skill of the meeting leader.

**The Meeting Leader**

The meeting leader plays the predominant role in a productive meeting. The better skills the meeting leader has, the more likely the meeting will be a success. Here are a few qualifications for an effective meeting leader. He/she should 1) be interested in the subject (and usually is because the subject is usually part of his/her responsibility), 2) be able to spend the time to prepare for the meeting, 3) be skilled in discussion-leading techniques, 4) be patient and 5) be tactful.

The meeting leader may take on either a ‘managers role’ or a ‘facilitator’s role’. In the managers’ role, he/she is an active participant, maintains power, and sets constraints. In the facilitator’s role, he/she acts as a neutral servant to the group and does not evaluate or contribute ideas. The role the meeting leader plays is largely dependent on the type of meeting type and its objective.

**Control of the Meeting**

Control of a meeting and clear closure (including action items) are the key to productive meetings. In industry, most meetings’ objectives are clearly stated at one time or another, and most meetings will have a clear agenda; but control during the meeting is severely lacking. Control should be established at the very start of a meeting by setting some ground rules. The roles of the participants should be defined at that time, and the process for the meeting should be made clear with statements such as “To make sure we are clear, Joe is going to present his idea without interruption, then we will go onto discussions of alternative actions”.

Controlling a meeting can take a considerable amount of people skills. Participants may have hidden agendas, they may be upset about something, or they may have personalities which hinder progress. Various personalities and private agendas, and other distractions must be overcome by the meeting leader. The meeting leader should develop control measures for various personality types/issues such as:

- the Talker
- the Griper
- the Narrow Minded One
- the Quiet One
- the Wrong Track
- Side Conversations
- Personality Problems
Remember, the manner in which the meeting leader handles people and their ideas at a meeting is heard by all in attendance. And, the way situations are dealt with will serve to either encourage or discourage the group’s further participation and support.

**Meeting Closure**

There are three very important items to be discussed with regard to meeting closure: Conclusions, Action Items and Meeting Minutes.

The meeting leader must summarize the conclusions of the meeting verbally for all to hear prior to adjourning the meeting. Also, action items must be clearly and appropriately identified verbally. Names of responsible parties must be associated with action items and action items must be assigned disposition dates. If disposition dates cannot be identified at the time of the meeting, a suspense date should be identified at which time a disposition date can be assigned.

And one final note. It has been the author’s experience that meeting leaders who prompt, “what do we do next” and solicit action items usually are the ones that get results. If there is no common understanding, conclusion(s) or action item(s) that come out of a meeting, one must question why the meeting ever took place. One can prepare for anticipated action items, for these might be the objective of the meeting.

**Conclusions**

As mentioned at the start of this paper, communications in the business world, be it engineering, construction or other, is one of the most important people skills a manager needs. And holding meetings requires both oral and written communications skills. Also, conducting meetings is one of the most important functions of managers.

There are several things to remember about conducting effective meetings, the most important of which are good PLANNING, effective CONTROL and decisive WRAP-UP. How effective these three are is directly related to the abilities and skills of the meeting leader. Planning takes a meeting leader with good organizational skills. Control requires discipline and some understanding of psychology. Good wrap-up, including action items, depends on the ability to summarize and paraphrase, and to assign tasks to proper individuals with sufficient time to accomplish the tasks.

The skills required to conduct effective meetings are sophisticated and cannot be developed in a short period of time. Learning must become habit. This ‘habit’ is be obtained through continual exposure and reinforcement. Educators should teach effective meeting skills to their students using one of the best teaching methods available, good example. The better we are at conducting our (classroom) meetings, the better our graduates will beat conducting their business meetings of the future.

**References**


Biographical Information

Dr. C.A. Ciesielski holds a B. S., M.S. and Ph.D. in Civil Engineering from Penn State University. During his 20 year career in industry, he has been a consultant, and has worked for several engineering, construction management and contracting firms. Currently he is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University where he teaches courses in Project Management and Construction Supervision.