

Revisiting the Role of Monthly Staff Meetings

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As I think back to the first time I actually began leading staff meetings (early 90's), the traditional format was in place; namely, brief introductions of new staff, announcements, agency news, and maybe a monthly training session or a speaker. Over time, we might share an occasional success story or plan an event. For the most part, staff could usually predict what was going to happen in each meeting. It began to feel somewhat stagnant to me as well as to my team of seven supervisors that were responsible for about thirty staff members.

In identifying the need for change, I also noticed that staff would schedule other meetings at the same time as the monthly staff meeting. Since I felt that staff meeting time should be protected space, I asked the other managers about what they thought was happening. I asked questions about how things might change and received many suggestions related to changing the day/time of the meeting to restructuring the agenda to finding other ways to share information with staff.

Over the course of four or five meetings with the supervisory team, we discussed a range of possibilities that included doing away with staff meetings completely and using email to design something that would meet the needs of the majority of staff. I shared with the supervisory team that I was concerned that presenting new ideas may create substantial push-back from staff. I really wanted to engage staff the same way we work with families. My thought was to mimic what we do with families; the staff would be able to relate to the engagement process and will feel honored. Our families have said to us that they feel honored when we ask them, "Tell us your story about what is needed" and then we listen.

Based on the information the supervisors and I gathered, we needed to jointly develop a plan and not impose our ideas on others. I assigned responsibilities to each of my supervisors so that as a group we would be presenting a structure for the all-staff monthly meeting designed to stimulate thinking about redesigning the staff meeting format. The format included recounting the history of our meetings (similar to discussing a family history), reviewing the purpose of staff meetings, and suggesting one or more experiential activities that would support brainstorming.

The primary brainstorming activity was designed to identify the pros and cons of the current meeting format. The staff members were divided into groups: two groups for pros and two groups for cons; they spent about five minutes in each of the groups and then we switched topics. As a result, staff had a chance to hear the views of others as well as move around the meeting room and make additional comments on each topic. We shared the results by combining similar items noted on the newsprint and clarified other items. We then took the items that we felt were positives, things that we wanted to keep as well as new items and we began to develop an agenda for future staff meetings.

This process took place over three separate staff meetings and we provided breakfast for everyone along with prizes and little gifts. As the word got out about the process, the attendance grew from 15 in attendance at the first the planning meeting to 22 at the second and 27 out of 30 attending the third meeting.

Brainstorming the Restructuring Process

The agenda of the first meeting focused on the rationale for redesigning the staff meetings, the history and purpose of the meetings, and the goal of identifying a staff meeting format that took into account the things we wanted to change and the things we wanted to keep. In preparation for the second staff meeting, the staff was given the assignment to think about the pros and cons of the structure of the current staff meeting, think about what works for them and what they needed to have included in order to commit to attending a meeting an hour and a half once a month. We were clear that even though we were asking their input, the leadership team of five would pretty much make the final decisions but we didn't want to make that in a void.

By the time we got to the third meeting we were ready to come up with a plan for how we wanted to structure the meeting agenda format. We used the following discussion questions:

- 1) What are the strengths that we find in coming together as a team?
- 2) What would be the five most important issues or topics, subject or activities that need to be included in the staff meeting?
- 3) How would you know that your needs were met at the end of the staff meeting?

The major themes of interest included:

- 1) the importance of training and learning from people from outside of the agency. Most previous training was provided by professionals inside the agency,
- 2) receiving first-hand information and using a staff meeting as a time to know what's going on in order to stop relying on agency rumors,
- 3) celebration of individuals, teams and the successes with the families we served,
- 4) assessing outcomes and productivity reports in order to learn about the successes and problems faced by different teams (e.g. what is that team doing to produce such a high success rate?). For example, one team may ask the other team, when you're in the engagement phase, what questions are you asking the families so that they begin to open up so that you're able to then move on to the planning phase?, and
- 5) coming together as a team is important because the teams (even members within the team work independently) do not always see one another. When I look around the table there is a good ten year history that people have with one another and some people have moved across three or four different programs, so they've been on three different teams. They don't always get to see one another because they are out in the community. At the beginning of the staff meetings, there is a lot of reminiscing about former staff members and networking that occurs.

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Surfacing the Unstated Agendas in Staff Meetings

While the family dynamics of teamwork are generally not played out in the staff meeting, they are played out in the office, For example, there have been conflicts between team members, sometimes leading to reassigning staff to another team when the issues could not be resolved. In a general sense, we talk about the expectations of staff in terms of professionalism, how to handle conflict, and the use of conflict resolution training. We did talk a lot about professional behavior and how to handle conflict and betrayal. People, of course, knew what was being discussed but we

actually wanted to be respectful of the people that were involved. Behind closed doors we did bring people together and help them understand that whatever was happening between the two of them was having a major impact on the office because if they were in the room together it was pretty intense.

I had an administrative assistant who reported directly to me and a supervisor who reports to me who were involved in a series of major conflicts. There was a period of time when I spent a lot of time away from the office and I would email her in the morning and say, these are some things I would love for you to take care of by posting a sign and emailing messages to various staff.

There were times when my administrative assistant was privy to information that perhaps other people didn't have. So, over a period of time, she took it upon herself to be more assertive by stepping outside her role by giving a directive to one of my supervisors who comes to her for assistance. When she gave him a directive, he felt she was totally out of order. I had asked her to send an email to all staff and remind them to enroll in a course. She is able to check who enrolls from her computer and -she saw that a supervisor had not enrolled. Instead of telling me, she took it upon herself to remind the supervisor to enroll. He yelled at her out loud in the office and the tone of voice was very rough and her response was also very rough.

I was actually out of town when I got a text message that said that the administrative assistant and the supervisor were having an argument in the office, people could hear them and they were creating an unsafe atmosphere. I sent a text back saying, thank you. I called to find out what's going on and I am told by the administrative assistant, "He did this and he said that," and then I get another call, "She did this and..." like children. I suggested that the three of us meet just to figure out what was going on and I said, I'm not sure who was in the office with you but please take the time to apologize to people who've heard because this is not appropriate.

When I got back to the office two days later, we had a conversation and the first thing the supervisor said was this was the sixth time she tried to give him a directive: "You need to do blah, blah, blah..." and he said, "I've had it because it's not her role to tell me what I'm supposed to do." He added, "I've read the email. I had a meeting and I was going to respond by enrolling but she attacked me."

One of the things the administrative assistant said was, "He's always ignoring me and I wanted to make sure that I got his attention. So I said hey, you need to..." Unbeknownst to me, in the past, people had observed this behavior but no one ever said anything to me and I never observed it. It had been going on for a while and they acknowledged it by saying: "We just didn't want to tell you because we figured we could work it out" and I said, "we need to figure out what you two need to do in order to work it out so that you can work and there are no more uproars in the main office where people walk in and we greet visitors." Ultimately, I let them talk while I was present. I asked them to identify the different ways that they help each other as well as those things that irritate each other and cause explosions as we need to resolve this situation. One of the things that the supervisor said was, "she is not my manager. She doesn't need to give me directions. As a matter of fact, she works for my program and she needs to respect the fact that she works on behalf of my team."

I was trying to understand what was going on and ultimately, it got down to the fact that her message is correct but her delivery was incorrect. Because this happened over a long period of time, they were finally able to resolve their differences. It's been two and a half years since this confrontation and at this point they are cordial with one another. She no longer gives him directions. As a matter of

fact, if she has anything to say to any of the managers, she knows that I need to deliver this message as opposed to it coming from her.

One of the things that happened in one of the staff meeting shortly thereafter both of the staff members experiencing the conflict decided that they wanted to make an announcement to the staff. Part of their acknowledgment was that they had conflict with one another and they chose not to handle it in an appropriate way by being confrontational in the office and they acknowledged the fact that because so many of our teams work with domestic violence that they were creating a toxic environment and one of the things that they wanted to do was to apologize to the staff.

The staff was surprised and taken aback by that level of candor and sharing and they totally appreciated the fact that their colleagues were so thoughtful to recognize they had disrespected the office environment and had generated a certain amount of trauma because their exchanges were volatile. They also apologized to me. One of the things that they said was that they knew if I was in the office and I heard their exchange, I would have been gracious about it but I would have escorted them out of the office to resolve it. They said that was one more thing they didn't want me to have to deal with.

I shared with the group that I appreciated the fact that we were able to talk about it because I did not want it to get so out of control that there would be no way to repair the damage. It was pointed out that making -the acknowledgment that there is conflict, -modeling what do when you have a conflict and how you arrive at some type of resolution was -impactful for other people. It was noted that office tension impacts more than just the people involved: You two may be okay, but others are not.

Key Elements of a Restructured Staff Meeting

- Acknowledging any significant event in the lives of staff
- Welcoming new staff by sharing brief bio descriptions of each staff member, especially reflecting on something that each person was proud of in order to get to know each other on a deeper level
- Receiving current information on agency updates where sometimes I need to deliver a message from our executive director as well as the background and rationale for various policies, procedures, changes, etc.
- Reviewing and discussing outcome measures, especially with the help of staff in the evaluation department.
- Planning for sharing success stories at quarterly staff meeting by inviting a family to join the staff at the meeting using the following steps:
 - Every month each team sends me a success story for review and I determine if a particular family should come to the meeting.
 - If selected, they are invited, coached, and given some questions just so that they do not walk in cold.
 - Some of the families rehearse with their staff member and the families are very much aware of other staff as the audience.
 - Families are encouraged to reflect on where they began when coming to the agency, the process that was useful to them, and where they see themselves as a result of our intervention.
 - On a staff meeting day when a family is invited, we actually have a real breakfast where they sit with their support team and we do

- introductions of staff and then we asked them to stay to share their experiences.
 - We then present them with a certificate and something that the family could use (gift card, games, tickets to amusement park).
- Facilitating the staff meeting by rotating the leadership role among the service teams
- More active use of experiential learning with activities that include forming groups and moving around the room
- The agenda always includes an element of surprise that seems to attract staff and promote variety
- Senior management support is provided in the following ways:
 - Two weeks before the monthly meeting (fourth Wednesday), I always check-in with the presenting team to get an update on the planning process and to learn if any assistance is needed
 - Given the annual Winter Holiday Party, no staff meeting is scheduled in December and with summer vacations, there is no monthly meeting in one of the summer months
 - Staff are encouraged to share examples of how they implement one or more of the agency service delivery principles and include their names in a drawing where one is selected to be read and then given a small token of appreciation
 - Staff are encouraged to use multi-media (video clips, powerpoint, music, dance, etc) presentations to demonstrate the similarity to the processes used to engage families in their homes (use of videos, music, games, sports, etc.)
 - All these efforts contribute to increased staff motivation to attend staff meetings
- Each team is now responsible, on a rotation basis, for leading the staff meetings by using one or more of the agency's 12 service delivery principles as a theme for the meeting. The principles include:
 - 1) Flexible services (defined as using an individualized approach where we are not locked into a specific agenda or using a cookie cutter method)
 - 2) Accessible staff.
 - 3) Needs driven
 - 4) Community-based
 - 5) Using natural support systems
 - 6) Culturally relevant services
 - 7) Outcomes-based
 - 8) Strengths-based
 - 9) Family-focused
 - 10) Solution-focused
 - 11) Collaborative and integrative
 - 12) Team based

In order to effectively engage staff in restructuring staff meetings, it was important for me to highlight and demonstrate the parallel structure between worker-client interactions and worker-worker interactions. In essence, staff meeting can be used to replicate the similar process used to engage clients. Staff can then begin to see the

parallel process of engaging peers and thereby use similar principles to those used to engage clients.