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SURVIVING CONTENTIOUS MEETINGS: SEVEN KEY STEPS® (11-7-14 ed.)

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INTRODUCTION

Public and internal meetings – where emotions run high and opposing views will be vigorously expressed – are potentially flammable situations. Survival means maximizing what you learn from every confrontation, structuring your participation, focusing what you say, understanding the dynamics of what is going on, and clearly assessing the future consequences of the meeting. The attendance preparation and management process outlined here will help you obtain the highest value from the contentious meeting experience.

THE SEVEN KEY STEPS

Step 1: Pre-meeting Preparation/Briefing

- Beyond the normal presentational preparation, those attending the meeting and those presenting should set attendance goals and thoroughly plan how your organization's participation will be organized. The two fundamental rules are these:
 - Everyone who attends will have a role to play and a job to do; and
 - Anyone who is not speaking or presenting is staffing those who are.

Develop a plan for working through the various elements of the meeting.

- Develop a list of killer questions and a list of questions you would love to respond to. Also develop the two or three substantial elements for the answers to these questions.

- When preparation time is limited, focus more on the question and answer process. Say everything out loud and in front of an audience that can help refine and focus the language in positive ways.
- Decide on the two or three verbal themes (brief sentences or phrases) you want to get across during the meeting, and come back to. These themes should be reflected in the final comments of your organization. Develop and practice the language out loud.
- Prepare presenter Crib cards (on 4x6 in lined note cards):
 - Key messages (in one or two short sentences) phrases
 - Important stories (By title only)
 - Facts and data
 - Your three major themes
 - Key facts about the other presenters (so you can say something positive)
 - Your summation points (developed during the program)
- Only say what you want people to remember, and say these ideas often.
- Be positive, constructive, simple, sensible and helpful, forget everything else.
- Avoid condescension: “We’re sorry you feel that way,” “That’s unfortunate,” “We don’t understand,” “You don’t understand,” “You fail to understand . . .”

Step 2: Set Ground Rules

- If it’s *your* meeting, set obviously fair rules for participation. Let others have the floor, with just a few common sense limits agreed to in advance.
- Always set an official start time and end time. (Start on time, to the second.)
- Media attendance policies:
 - Do the meeting first then the questions from everyone and reporters.
 - No or very low light cameras. Lights are disruptive, irritating, and insight bad behavior. Today’s camera technologies can operate extremely well in even very low light situations.
 - Warn television outfits to prepare to operate in natural light.
- Suggest a method for seeking participant questions during the meeting; have blank question cards in the audience that can be brought up to the speakers.
 - Rather than disrupt the meeting to respond to the questions handed in, use these questions to start the official Q&A following the presentation.
- If it’s *their* meeting and you are invited to participate, insist on specific ground rules such as:

- Opening comments from your speaker;
 - Comments between their speakers;
 - Opportunity to correct misstatements promptly;
 - Permission to interrupt if something is really wrong;
 - Closing comments from your chief presenter; and
 - Permission to record and transcribe or create a verbatim record of the meeting to be posted on your website and be provided to your opposition.
- Let everyone know what the agenda and ground rules are.

Step 3: Staff the Meeting for Maximum Contact

- Emotional meetings should be attended by at least two people, one who speaks and answers questions and one who will “staff” the presenter by:
 - Listening carefully to what is being talked about “in the background”;
 - Taking careful conscientious notes, particularly on the questions asked and the substantial elements of the responses given;
 - During the presentation be prepared to provide your presenters key observations, suggestions, corrections if we misstate something.
 - Pay particular attention to negative language and phrases that may cause headlines or require future responses and to whom the negatives were directed;
 - Taking special note of the more negative presenters: and,
 - Begin to establish an agenda for follow up with those most negative, as well as those most positive.
- Avoid over-staffing or too many presenters. One good, well-rehearsed presenter accompanied by one or two staff persons for every 100 attendees is a good standard.
- Everyone from your organization who attends, whether they have an official role or not, is responsible to contribute helpful observations at the debrief meeting following the presentation.
- Insist (gently) that ground rules be observed.

Step 4: Debrief Immediately Following the Meeting

- For best debriefing results, debrief immediately following the meeting. Memory is short; multiple memories degrade at the same rate. Memories are short and very faulty during contentious situations.
 - Go to a neutral site – a coffee shop, restaurant, or conference room.
 - Systematically review:
 - The sequence of the meeting;
 - The sequence of speakers;

- The sequence of questions; and
- The substance of our and their responses.
- Determine what needs to be done tomorrow by/with whom.
- Prepare a contrast analysis (one-page topic outlines) comparing what they said v. what we said
- Prepare a contrast analysis comparing their key messages to ours
- Prepare a contrast analysis comparing what they expected and what happened from our perspective
- Prepare a similar analysis for us

Be brutally but charitably honest with each other.

Step 5: *Deliver on What You Promise*

- If you agreed to look something up or get additional information, get it and deliver it promptly.
- If you promised to begin developing additional information or to start new processes, get them underway and notify those to whom you made the promise.
- Set the date for the next meeting and keep talking.

Step 6: *Manage the Record*

- Record and transcribe the meeting. (Do this yourself.)
- Share the transcript and raw audio with:
 - Participants;
 - Policy makers;
 - Media; and
 - Anyone requesting one.
 - Get both the transcript and the audio up on your web site ASAP
- Those who are actively opposing you will pay far more attention to what you should actually say and do than you will, especially to your negative responses and defensive threats. A transcript will confirm what you said, help create understanding, reduce or expose misunderstanding be the foundation for your correction, comments and clarifications.
- If there are statements or facts that need to be fixed, do it promptly and notify those who care or are directly affected.

Step 7: *Get Used to the Dichotomies*

- Contentious meetings rarely reveal the truth. That's because the truth is really quite different and unique to each participant. The truth will be based upon each

participant's particular point of reference, set of filters, attitudes, and how much they feel like victims – remember Truth is 15% facts and data, and 85% emotion and point of reference.

- Data matters, but stories and examples always matter more.
- People act differently in public than in private.
 - The meek, mild-mannered housewife sitting in an office pleasantly talking face-to-face with an individual businessperson becomes the teary-eyed, angry activist in public and in front of television cameras.
 - The helpful, understanding, inquisitive public official becomes the upset and irritable champion of victimized constituents.
 - The empathetic reporter who only “wants to tell your side of the story” gives the opponents the headline, quotes only your negative statements, and portrays you as the enemy.
 - The seemingly empathetic reporter who sounds so much like they really want to tell your story, but somehow, in a public setting, fail ask you any questions related to what you wanted to talk about.

CONCLUSION

These meeting attendance procedures provide a baseline for responding to, accommodating, and overcoming issues and questions that may arise during very intense emotional public settings. Manage the record following the meeting, and you'll achieve what you intended by sponsoring or attending the meeting.

It's your story, it's your destiny, if you fail to manage it, someone else will do it for you.

I've always loved the Winston Churchill quote in which he said (my approximation), “History will help people remember and think highly of my participation in the Second World War . . . because I will write that history.” He did, and we do.