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COMMENTARY

What If Faculty Meetings Were Voluntary?

By Thomas R. Hoerr

I've posed this question to educators around the country: What if faculty meetings were voluntary? The reaction I get is quite predictable. Whether I am talking to a group of teachers, a collection of administrators, or people representing a combination of roles, whether public or private or parochial, the response is consistent. My question is always met with laughter, and a touch of incredulity.

These varied groups of professionals can't imagine that anyone would choose to go to a faculty meeting if given a choice. "Are you kidding me?" replied one teacher. "I'm gone." Her comment elicited enthusiastic nods from those sitting nearby.

It's clear that for all our talk about turning schools into learning communities and embracing collegiality and collaboration, we have fallen short in making faculty meetings times for learning valued by everyone.

In some respects, this is understandable: It takes far more time and energy to plan meetings that are meaningful, interactive, and engaging than it does to read from a script. And the last thing administrators have is enough time, a predicament shared by almost everyone else in schools. With faculty meetings viewed as something that has to happen, it's best that they happen quickly. The jingling of car keys after about 40 minutes sends an auditory signal that attention spans have waned and it's time to move on, figuratively and physically.

But this need not be the case. Despite the fact that teachers and administrators are worn out at the end of the day, and regardless of their having something else that needs to be done, faculty meetings *can* be productive and enjoyable. Too often, though, administrators fail to seize the potential because they view these meetings too narrowly and traditionally.

If we are to transform faculty meetings into gatherings that add substance to the life of a school, rather than waste the time of busy professionals, we need to reject five myths that surround them:

Myth No.1. *Faculty meetings are good times to share information.*

We shouldn't use this venue to dispense information that can be conveyed more efficiently in writing. Faculty meetings can be an occasion when clarifications are sought or questions answered, but they should not be a time when bulletins are read and announcements made. Convening people so that they can be read to is a disservice to everyone.

Myth No. 2. *Faculty meetings belong to administrators.*

Administrators may lead faculty meetings, but teachers should have input into the agenda and be responsible for active participation. They should be able to share their successes with peers, and ask questions that help reduce

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their frustrations.

At my school, committees have planned faculty meetings devoted to subjects such as multiple intelligences, the school's efforts to implement new approaches to student behavior, and building community. Each of these meetings was planned by teachers as a way to tap in to others' ideas and get everyone on board.

Myth No. 3. *Faculty meetings are times for administrators to be in charge.*

These meetings should be opportunities for everyone to lead, and where teachers can have the chance to teach others. Staff members can present what they have learned at workshops, or talk about articles they have read. What better way to help everyone grow than to give time to a department or a grade-level team to share new skills or information?

The meetings can also be times when teachers turn to their peers for help, when they throw out an issue and ask for feedback or input. In a good school, teachers and administrators learn with and from one another, and faculty meetings are often the best opportunities for this to happen.

Myth No. 4. *Faculty meetings should focus only on content.*

Faculty meetings should be opportunities for teachers and administrators to grow as colleagues. Think of the positive effects that might come from allocating 10 minutes at the beginning of a meeting for teachers to talk in small groups about this question: What have you done in your classroom during the past week that makes you proud? A different question could be posed at each meeting: What have you done in the past week that you'd do differently if you had the opportunity? What curriculum should we de-emphasize? What is frustrating you? Who has been helpful to you in the past week? How can the administration help you become a better teacher? Often, the dialogue that begins at a faculty meeting carries over to the teachers' lounge or parking lot.

Myth No. 5. *Faculty meetings are serious, and a smile means we're not being productive.*

There's a time to be serious and a time to play, and that's as true for teachers as it is for kids. Some of each faculty meeting should be devoted to eliciting smiles and warmth: asking people to talk to someone or share a success story, opening a big bag of cookies or M&M's, or telling a story sure to result in a laugh or a groan. The tactic doesn't matter. What matters is that the meetings are enjoyable and everyone looks forward to attending them. Congeniality is the base of collegiality. Faculty meetings are a time to develop a sense of teamwork, to remind everyone that we're all in this together.

Schools need to remember to apply the same principles to adult learning that they do to student learning. The chances for success are best when the learner is motivated and engaged, and when the lessons are appropriate for the individual. It's much more difficult to engage learners who are simply observers, so it's important to get everyone involved.

I began one faculty meeting by asking teachers to define "joyful learning." "It's in our mission statement," I reminded them, "but what does it mean to you, and how do you pursue it in your classroom?" They were given a few minutes to reflect on this, and then met in groups to share their thoughts. The number and variety of such questions administrators could pose at faculty meetings are endless.

Schools also should consider holding faculty meetings in various places. Teachers could host meetings and share a bit about what happens in their own space. Or perhaps a meeting could be held outside of school. Sometimes a different setting can help create a different tone.

In a good school, everyone grows, and faculty meetings are opportunities to facilitate that growth. They are a venue for learning and teamwork. They're a chance to build school culture, to remind everyone that we work hard and enjoy one another. And they can, just maybe, become a fixture of school life

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Thomas R. Hoerr is the head of the New City School in St. Louis. His books include The Art of School Leadership and School Leadership for the Future, published this year. He can be contacted at trhoerr@newcityschool.org.

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POWERED BY  Pluck



Kate in OK wrote:

I don't know how to break it to ya...but you can do all five of these things and people still hate faculty meetings. I know; we do them. It is just a fact of life that meetings are not the most productive way to do things, if you take the perspective of one individual. Sometimes, you have to take the perspective of the group.

12/4/2009 9:30 AM EST on EdWeek

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seashar wrote:

What if schooling itself were voluntary (i.e. not compulsory)?

It's too much trouble for me, but someone may want to carry this idea to a re-wording of the subject article and replace all references to "faculty" with "learners".

This is not a specious exercise; yet, some may not be able to carry it very far, most will deride with indignant dismissal.

Try it.

12/4/2009 12:43 PM EST on EdWeek

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KC Cat wrote:

Most faculty meetings are about power tripping principals and administrators giving teachers an unintentional reminder of why they left classroom teaching... Even with it spelled out to them in articles like this, they just don't get it.....

12/4/2009 4:51 PM EST on EdWeek

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Karenteacher wrote:

About #4 - I know way too many administrators who ask people to share - and won't stop until "enough" people have done so. I hate being forced to do it, and avoid it like the plague; if I have something I want to share, I will, but being forced makes it a nasty, annoying experience.

12/4/2009 7:28 PM EST on EdWeek

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EricJ wrote:

I have to agree with Kate in OK and Karenteacher. We have done several of the recommendations too, and I still hate staff meetings. The "faculty-led" workshops are even worse. In part, the problem is that administrators still control the exchange of ideas by limiting the "teacher-chosen" topics to ones that support current school improvement plans. And mostly, administration implies, not too subtly, that teachers had better do what their peers are suggesting, or else.

As for sharing, I am a product of my lecture-based education. I despise sharing. Just give me the information, and let me process it on my own time. I can understand why many of my students dislike group-sharing activities. If I want to share my successes and failures, I'm going to do it with one or two friends over lunch. Don't make me get in a group with 3 - 5 interdisciplinary peers, with whom I don't regularly work, and share my triumphs and embarrassments.

The best part about our staff meetings is the opportunity to ask our administrators questions to clarify the cryptic, vague, and contradictory bulletins and announcements distributed since the previous staff meeting.

12/5/2009 12:28 AM EST on EdWeek

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Fangtai wrote:

Faculty meetings are actually voluntary. There is nobody with a bat or rifle standing outside the classroom to usher faculty into the meetings. Yes, you could face discipline and perhaps a firing for skipping meetings, but that is a consequence of ones choice. Too often, people in general feel forced to do things. Children feel forced to attend school, teachers to teach them and parents to get them up in the morning, fed, clothed and off to school. All of us would rather that someone else is reesponsible for our activities, someone else plans them and organizes them. One reason is that this attitude takes the onus of any blame form our shoulders. If a student gets a poor grade, it is ashared responsibility between teacher, student and parents. Innovation comes from attempts, and attempts carry the possibility of failure. . At least in a faculty meeting, the blame or success is shared.

12/5/2009 8:33 AM EST on EdWeek

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