

Best practices
for public-meeting
management

how to hold a dove



“**M**anaging is like holding a dove in your hand. Squeeze too hard and you kill it; not hard enough and it flies away.” This maxim by former Los Angeles Dodgers coach Tommy Lasorda can serve as a guide for many things—leading a work group, raising children, or teaching a class.

It can also apply to staffing a public meeting. The ability to wisely “hold the dove” in such meetings is crucial for the staff that supports public decision making—whether made by an elected board or volunteer advisory body.

In public meetings, managers must respond to a number of technical, political, and interpersonal issues, all within a highly charged, high-stakes atmosphere where issues often unfold in unpredict-

able and emotional ways. The media presence and the televised meetings further heighten the stakes.

Impressions about the effectiveness of a city or county manager will be heavily shaped by how well the manager handles such meetings. It all adds up to an enormous amount of pressure for those who sit in the hot seat.

Given the high stakes involved in staff members’ performance during governing meetings, our profession pays surprisingly little attention to the skills, strategies, and logistics that may enhance meeting management effectiveness. Instead, we rely on our natural speaking skills, thinking on our feet, and, of course, good old on-the-job training.

Perhaps we neglect meeting management because it is more about art

than science. After all, every elected board has its own unique personality and needs, and every community has a different culture.

After a recent city advisory board meeting when the dove flew away and there were unpleasant post-meeting repercussions, I decided to remind myself and my colleagues of the best practices for public-meeting management. This is done with an extremely healthy respect for the “theater art” that is ultimately required.

Theater of Public Decision Making

To achieve good public-meeting outcomes, solid pre-production planning is essential. The staff report (the “script”) must tell the story, and the performance itself—the public meeting—must be supported by staff. No textbook teaches

this art, but here are strategies that can promote stronger performances and set the scene and the stage:

Write a good, clear script. Solid analysis, clear recommendations, and a staff report that tells the story are essential. But they are not enough.

Write and format the story so that the headliner issue is the star of the show. The dialogue should be simple and

impression with them by asking “Is this making sense? Do we need to clarify the issue further?”

Judge the performance by what is happening under the surface as well as on the surface. Listen for what is not being said. Read between the lines. Is there a subplot evolving, new agendas being expressed? If so, are these dynamics contributing to the dialogue, or should the staff gently surface the

or motions. And if an “intermission” is needed to do so, suggest one!

Tell the final story together as an ensemble, not as solo actors. Monologues can be fun, but they must not drive the sequel (the staff follow-up). If decision-makers appear to be expecting follow-up on individually expressed interests, staff must insist on “ensemble direction” that could include this: “I heard two councilmembers express an interest in X and

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straight, as in “The main issue before the council is to. . .” Format the report so that the star issue is clearly in the spotlight by setting it off with white space, italics, and so forth. Do not lose key issues in large, crowded, busy paragraphs.

Block out the opening scene ahead of time. Determine the kind of presentation that is needed. Consider a read-through with the committee chair to confirm that the chairperson recognizes the story line (core issues) and what needs to be front and center. Make sure that the supporting cast (other staff members) is well rehearsed and ready to play their roles.

The Meeting Performance

Start with a focused opening scene. State and visually display the main issue strongly and clearly. Decision-making bodies are ultimately free to improvise and adopt recommendations that differ from management’s recommendations, but the issues to be decided should always be framed clearly by the staff.

Observe “actor” body language and facial expressions. Are decisionmakers following the story or are they confused or frustrated? If it appears that they are uncertain, don’t hesitate to confirm your

subplots and redirect the discussion? Be careful not to squeeze too tightly, but don’t let things fly away either.

Emphasize the main story, not sub-stories. You may need to reset the scene by saying, “These are interesting issues, but we really can’t determine the best follow-up steps until we have zeroed in on your preferred alternative. Let’s do that first and come back to these issues later.”

Supply additional direction for the actors if they need it. If additional direction is needed, it could well be time to step in and say, “This is an interesting discussion and might yield some helpful direction later on, but the main issue before your board is. . . .”

Help the story along; don’t muddle the plot. If the supporting cast is muddling the plot, step in and get the story back on track.

Remain flexible; don’t get boxed in. If decisionmakers just get stuck—they don’t want to adopt a certain recommendation but can’t figure out an alternative—staff may consider consulting on the fly to develop suggested alternative language

two express an interest in Y. We need to know where three of you are.”)

Avoid cliffhangers! Cliffhangers, which are designed to bring audiences back again and again, can certainly be entertaining. Revisiting the same issue is, however, rarely fun in public decision making. So if the actors are proceeding toward an ambiguous final scene, then some clarification will be needed before the curtain comes down.

Epilogue

A wise meeting producer must avoid overdirecting and must trust the “actors” to play their parts with some freedom to create but within the context of the story to be told. At the same time, the actors cannot improvise to the point of confusing or destroying the performance needed to properly address the publicly billed issue.

Although there is no perfect way to “hold the dove” in a public meeting, with proper preparation, focus, and direction, a happy ending—or at least a productive one—is far more likely. **PM**



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