

Leadership Lessons

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The APS Leadership Institute is a committee with the stated goal of increasing and improving member participation in APS leadership. As such, we thought it was important to discuss why we are going through the effort to develop a column on leadership in *Phytopathology News*. The answer comes down to need and hope.

We have all had the opportunity to serve on committees, working groups, task forces, and boards, and we have all experienced the difference between when these sessions are run well and when they are not. We need to learn, usually through experience, how to run a meeting efficiently. A well-constructed agenda has a lot to do with that. This column, provided by APS Executive Vice President Emeritus **Steven Nelson**, breaks down the intangible quality of what it takes to develop an agenda to frame a productive meeting. Hopefully, this will save on the number of meetings to accomplish goals and increase our opportunities to read and do something fun!

With that in mind, it is our hope that these columns provide tips to improve not only your professional life, but maybe your personal one, too, because you won't be wasting so much time in poorly run, agendaless meetings. ■

Building Meeting Agendas

Steven Nelson, Executive Vice President Emeritus, aps@scisoc.org

What is there to know about creating an agenda? There is nothing hard about this; it is just a list of things your group will discuss during your meeting, right? In reality, many meetings are not meaningful or productive, nor do they achieve the desired deliverables because of inadequate agendas. When I moved into the position of executive vice president for APS, I created the agendas for the APS Council meetings. I also worked with a “management coach,” and I expressed my frustration to the coach that our council discussions were not very strategic. He suggested that we examine the last few agendas, helping me to see that the agendas were not strategic—they were a list of nonstrategic issues that were being discussed in great detail rather than the strategic issues that council was responsible for. My prior job responsibilities included managing the day-to-day operations of APS, and I was very comfortable providing a lot of information on operations.

Good agendas need to be appropriate to what you hope to accomplish. As much or more time should be invested in preparing an agenda that frames the topic or issue to be discussed. Agendas should also clearly describe the desired deliverable for the topic. Good agendas can set the stage for a spark of innovation that can happen with good dialogue and open minds. Great ideas and solutions don't always happen, but they will happen more often with good agendas.

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A common mistake is to create agendas that include too many topics that require major dialogue and discussion without allowing nearly enough time. If you are not sure if the agenda is too long, be sure to arrange the most important—and often the most difficult—items early on the agenda. Arrange topics at the end that require less brain power and energy and that you can live without if time runs out.

Agendas should not throw a topic on the table without providing appropriate background information and framing the scope. What is appropriate background material? It is not efficient in the actual meeting to provide entire background stories and bring everyone up to speed before actual dialogue can begin. Attendees should be provided background material along with the agenda well in advance of the meeting. It is far more efficient for attendees to read background information on their own. Remind meeting participants that they are expected to come prepared to start the dialogue in order to reach a decision or conclusion. This, of course, is more difficult for long, complex meetings.

It's a real challenge to get a good agenda and background material to participants a week or more in advance, but there is a great payoff in the results of the meeting.

Everyone's time is precious. Start the agenda on time even if some members have not arrived. Don't spend much time bringing late participants up to speed. The agenda should provide enough description along with the background materials so that late comers can catch up on their own.

A good practice is to assign specific agenda items to one of the meeting participants (preparing background materials and leading the dialogue on the issue). It helps if they are also knowledgeable on the topic and can frame the issues. If you are running the meeting, you should think about ensuring adequate time for meeting participants to provide their input and mitigate the dialogue being dominated by one or two individuals.

Even for simple, short meetings, good agendas are essential to accomplishing a meeting's goals. If there aren't clear deliverables for the meeting, perhaps there is no need for the meeting? ■