

Perceptions of Teachers towards Staff Meetings.

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Abstract: Staff meetings are a frequent occurrence in most educational institutions. They can be an important occasion for information sharing, planning school's programmes, developing teachers as well grounding teachers in the culture of the school. However, it appears as if a good number of teachers does not like staff meetings for a number of reasons. This study interrogated the disposition of primary school teachers towards staff meetings. The study was conducted in Mzilikazi District of Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. A quantitative methodology was used. Data were collected from 80 teachers who were randomly sampled. Major findings were that teachers have mixed feelings towards staff meetings; some of the reasons why teachers dislike staff meetings revolve around school heads' management styles and teachers were in accord on the reasons for holding staff meetings as well as factors which contribute towards the effectiveness of staff meetings. It was recommended that school heads be staff developed in how to plan and conduct staff meetings. Future research should focus on school heads' staff meeting experiences.

Key words: school heads; staff meeting; and teachers.

I. Introduction

All schools (primary and secondary) hold meetings. There are mandatory beginning and end of term meetings. School heads can also hold periodic end of month meetings. Apart from these whole school meetings, teachers attend departmental and committee meetings. More often than not, teachers complain about the number and duration of most meetings. Furthermore, at times the time spent in meetings does not translate into improved performance on the part of pupils. Hartman (2014) online argues that: "Meetings feel an increasing number of hours in the workday, and yet most employees consider them as a waste of time. A survey of U.S. professionals ranked meetings as the number one office productivity killer". From our experiences as educational leaders and school managers, we are aware of the many times we have discussed critical activities and issues affecting service delivery in our schools. In most cases, deliberations in our meetings have resulted in improved school performance in a number of school success indicators such as pupil pass rate and dropout rate. Given all these benefits of staff meetings, the question begging for attention is: *Why do some teachers dislike staff meetings?* In an attempt to address this question, this article interrogates staff meetings in primary schools by speaking to the following questions which guided the study: First, what do teachers view as the reasons that may contribute to the development of negative attitudes in teachers towards staff meetings? Second, what do teachers perceive as factors that can make meetings effective? Third, from the perspective of teachers what are the legitimate reasons for holding staff meetings? Unfortunately not much has been done in form of empirical studies on this very important subject in Zimbabwe.

II. Review Of Related Literature

Legitimate reasons for holding staff meetings

Amin (2015) defines a staff meeting as an employee conference that maybe conducted in whichever manner and frequency the organizer wishes. In the context of this article, a staff meeting is a sanctioned gathering of the school head, teachers and the other administrative staff for the purpose of deliberating the affairs of the school. Amin notes that in order to come up with legitimate reasons for holding a staff meeting, the school head should have a plausible objective for holding the meeting. The objective could be derived from answering the following questions:

- What is the reason for the meeting?
- What do I want to achieve as the school head?
- What specific outcomes am I trying to achieve at this meeting?
- How important are the outcomes?

UNESCO (undated) online states that:

Meetings are an essential practical aspect of running a school. Used as management tools, they can be very beneficial but all too often they do not achieve the intended results. Holding effective meetings does not depend on intuition and good fortune but on effective management skills. . . . As a management tool, meetings

can become an effective method of planning activities, informing staff members of activities, motivating a team spirit, coordinating activities, solving problems and building cohesion in the staff room.

In addition, if done properly, staff meetings have the potential to: be the most effective way of making decisions in a school; enable participants to contribute and share their thoughts and as a result will feel more engaged with their school; and to lead to tangible results if the discussions are properly minuted accompanied by a tasks list (Meeting, 2015). Adams (2013) advances two other reasons for holding staff meetings. First, a staff meeting is the perfect time to cultivate curiosity, creativity, learning, sharing and growing in teachers, traits which teachers must encourage and demand from their pupils. Second, staff meetings help to establish the school culture.

The American Management Association (undated) highlights a number of benefits that accrue from well planned and conducted meetings from a business perspective. These benefits are summarized below.

- **Better decisions**

When meetings are well planned and well conducted, they result in better decisions because of the following two reasons. First, the issue being decided on will have been delineated and better understood by the input of individuals who see the issue from their own perspectives. Second, better decisions are often made in meetings because differences arise that set the stage for creative solutions to be developed that would not otherwise be discovered. In a well managed meeting, differences can be explored in a professional and productive way.

- **Broader Buy-In and Consensus**

In today's world it is important that employees at all levels buy-in to the major decisions of their organizations. This is because the success of these decisions is dependent on everyone's support. The employees have to carry out the decisions, often with little supervision. Staff meetings are occasions where such buy-in should occur. During staff meetings, questions can be raised, doubts expressed and issues clarified. Once people are satisfied that their issues have been addressed, or at least heard, they begin to buy-in. Further, if they are invited to create the new idea, initiative or solution, then buy-in comes earlier in the process.

- **Better Understanding of Complex Problems and Issues**

Staff meetings provide a forum for broadening employees' understanding of important organizational challenges by seeking everyone's point of view, which lead to better strategies, decisions and solutions.

- **More Complete Resolution of Conflicts**

Conflict in organizations is to be expected. However, if it goes unresolved it often destroys the fibre of the organization. When this happens, a clearing of the air must take place, and the best forum is a well managed meeting of affected parties.

- **More Thorough Follow-Up and Follow-Through**

If tasks are given in a meeting, employees have a better sense of why their individual contributions are important and how they fit into the bigger picture. They also have a better sense, based on seeing what other people were assigned to do, of knowing who to go to for help or collaboration. There is also an underlying social obligation. If a person accepts an assignment publicly, he or she feels a higher obligation to accomplish it. Other benefits to a well run meeting are: People have real opportunities to work on their interpersonal communication and presentation skills. People often learn in meetings how to work together better and how to manage conflict more productively, as well as to show professional respect to their colleagues. These benefits result in a more purposeful, productive and capable organization. While the benefits advanced by The American Management Association seem to relate to a business organization, their relevance to staff meetings in an educational institution is unquestionable.

UNESCO (undated) points out that staff meetings provide means of communication between the school head and teachers on matters concerning the running of the school. Given this reason, good communications becomes an essential feature of successful meetings. Effective communication results in the creation of a good school climate and an environment of trust where teachers feel secure and confident to put across their ideas without fear of being victimized. The cumulative effect of staff meetings is that schools will be able to achieve their objectives, all other things being equal. Given all these benefits of staff meetings, why then do some teachers dislike staff meetings?

Reasons why teachers do not like staff meetings

In a review of literature on staff meetings, Menard (2010) identified a number of barriers to successful staff meetings. Some of the frequently cited barriers are: teachers not receiving any psychological benefits from

attending meetings; feelings of intimidation, disrespect, distrust, uncertainty and bitterness; poor group dynamics prevent staff from establishing and expressing personal beliefs and inhibit a healthy avenue for two-way communication; devoting too much or too little time to agenda items; intent and purpose of the meetings; and poor school community relationship. In addition, Meetking (2015) stresses that teachers may dislike meetings if the school head comes to the meeting not optimally prepared and lack of good task follow-up – a situation where the meeting becomes a talkshow, what is discussed in the meeting ends there. The American Management Association (undated) states that: “Most meeting experts agree on at least two things: (1) There are too many meetings in the workplace and (2) most of them are a waste of time. This is due most often to poorly planned and poorly run meetings. Below I focus on factors which can culminate in the holding of effective staff meetings.

Factors which can make staff meetings effective

Successful and effective staff meetings are dependent on proper planning. Various sources among them Hartman (2014), Amin (2015) and Meetking (2015) suggest that the success of staff meetings is contingent on what happens before, during and after the meeting. These sources suggest the following strategies:

- **Before the meeting**

The school head should define the purpose of the meeting. Being guided by a clear purpose, he/she should then proceed to develop an agenda. The agenda should be circulated among staff, inviting them to come up with additional agenda items if they so wish. When the agenda is fully developed, it should be distributed to those who will attend the meeting well in advance. This will give members time to research if need be in preparation for the meeting. Such an arrangement is likely to lead to full engagement of the staff during the meeting. The school head should indicate time and venue of the meeting in the notice of the meeting that will be sent to teachers. The chairs should be arranged in such a way that the school head and teachers are in full view of each other, probably in a semi-circle.

- **During the meeting**

At the start of the meeting, the school head should greet members and make them feel at home as well as encouraging members to openly contribute to the discussions. The meeting should start on time, end on time and be conducted in line with the agenda. The school head should encourage feedback. Ideas, activities and commitment to the organization improve when members see their input in the decision-making process. The school head should ensure that meeting proceedings are properly minuted. Members should be encouraged to switch off their cell phones during meetings. If members do not switch off their cell phones, chances are that they may not focus on the meeting. Instead, they may be emailing, surfing the web, or just playing around with their technology, especially if they think that the meeting is boring. As a leader, the school head should be a role model by listening, showing interest, appreciation and confidence in members. Where mistakes have been done by the school administration, the school head should admit such mistakes and take responsibility. The agreements arrived at should be summarized and the meeting concluded on a unifying or positive note. The school head should also summarise action items and indicate who is responsible and when activities are due. If possible, participants should be informed of the date, time and venue for the next meeting. During the meeting, it is imperative that the school head manages the discussion and keep it on track.

- **After the meeting**

There should be meeting follow-ups and task tracking. Minutes of the meeting should be distributed to members who participated within three days of the meeting. Memories of the meeting deliberations will still be fresh such that any differences in the interpretations can be clarified. Follow-up on delegated tasks should be done, ensuring that members understand and carry out their responsibilities. The school head should give recognition and appreciation to excellent and timely progress. If there is any unfinished business on allocated tasks, the school head should include such tasks in the agenda of the next meeting. The next meeting should begin with an overview of what was accomplished from the previous meeting.

As argued by Hagan (2014), factors contributing to effective staff meetings underscore the fact that effective staff meetings do not just happen by accident, they are designed. It is important to establish ground rules for meetings and observe the rules.

Research Methodology and Design

The study adopted a quantitative methodology, where a descriptive survey design was used. The sample of 80 teachers was randomly selected from primary school teachers who were teaching in government primary schools in the Mzilikazi District of Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. Random sampling was used because it ensured that all the respondents who constituted the population had an equal chance of being selected,

increases the probability of coming up with a representative sample and made it possible for the generalization of the findings to the population of the study (Creswell, 2014). Data were collected from teachers using a questionnaire in the form of a Likert Scale. The use of a questionnaire facilitated data collection from a larger geographically spaced sample at a cheaper cost. The Likert Scale was considered appropriate because it provided more reliable scores that produced more variability, which helped the researcher to make finer distinctions among the respondents (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). Data were analysed through descriptive statistics.

III. Findings And Discussion

Table 4.1: Reasons why teachers do not like staff meetings

Reason	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Poor leadership	75	25
Unclear goals – teachers not really sure what they are trying to achieve	41	59
Lack of commitment – assignments are not taken seriously by teachers	25	75
No clear focus	33	67
School management not being responsive to the recommendations of meetings	67	23
Problems are discussed but no clear conclusions are reached	75	25
Lack of follow-through	42	58
One person or clique dominates the meeting	67	23
No clear agenda	08	92
Hidden agenda – e.g. teachers having scores to settle	83	17

As evident from Table 4.1 teachers had mixed feelings regarding reasons why they do not like staff meetings. This could be a result of teachers experiencing different management styles in their respective schools – autocratic, democratic and laissez faire. However, it is interesting to note that five reasons that were unanimously agreed upon by teachers as contributing towards the teachers’ disliking staff meetings all impinge on school management. This could be interpreted to mean that having an interest or no interest in staff meetings rests with the type of school leadership. The teachers’ dispositions on the five reasons mirror Menard’s (2010) barriers to successful staff meetings. It is however surprising to note that lack of a clear meeting agenda was not indicated by most teachers as a reason contributing to teachers’ disliking of staff meetings, contrary to literature claims. Unfortunately, it could not be established why lack of a clear meeting agenda does not affect the teachers’ dispositions towards staff meetings. By conjecture, this could be attributed to the possibility that may be in some schools teachers are rarely shown the meeting agendas. This area begs more interrogation.

Table 4.2: Factors which contribute to effective staff meetings

Factor	Agree	Disagree
Clear definition of purpose of the meeting	100	
Teachers listen and are sensitive to each others’ needs and opinions	100	
Teachers are encouraged to contribute to the discussion	100	
Good and adequate preparation for the meeting	100	
Commitment of school heads and teachers	100	
Interruptions are avoided or held to a minimum	83	17
Good and correct minuting of deliberations	100	
Recognition of the teachers’ efforts during meetings	100	
School management accepting and using outcomes from staff meetings	92	08

Teachers concurred in seven out of nine factors that contribute to effective staff meetings. Writers such as Hagan (2014), Hartman (2014) and Amin (2015) are in agreement that factors in Table 4.2 have a bearing on the effectiveness of staff meetings. However, 17% of the teachers were of the view that interruptions during staff meetings have little to do with the effectiveness of staff meetings. Similarly, 8% indicated that whether school management takes on board outcomes of the meetings or not, does not have an impact on teachers’ dispositions towards staff meetings.

Table 4.3: Legitimate reasons for holding staff meetings

Reason	Agree	Disagree
To share information	100	
To plan future programmes	92	08
To co-ordinate actions of individuals or units	100	
To solve problems	100	
To gather information, get feedback and review past performance	100	
To determine policy	92	08
To motivate teachers	83	17
To provide support to teachers	92	08
To provide support to teachers	83	17

Generally, teachers were in accord that the reasons in Table 4.3 were the legitimate reasons why school heads hold staff meetings. Literature sources such as American Management Association (undated), Adams (2014) and Amin (2015) reiterate the legitimacy of the reasons. Those few teachers who disagreed with the legitimacy of some of reasons could be because of the fact that in their schools they have not experienced the purported reasons. This could be attributed to the school heads' management styles and level of training in educational management.

IV. Conclusion

Basing on the above, it can be concluded that:

- Teachers generally have mixed feelings towards staff meetings.
- Teachers feel that the success of staff meetings depends on a number of factors.
- Well planned and conducted staff meetings contribute to teacher development and school improvement.
- Most factors that are responsible for the development of negative feelings towards staff meetings in teachers are related to the school heads' management styles and level of education in educational management.

V. Recommendations

Recommendations coming out of this study are:

- School heads should be encouraged to plan for their staff meetings. Information that could be disseminated to teachers through memos should not constitute staff meeting agendas because they it will extend the time spent in meetings unnecessarily.
- School heads should be staff developed in planning and conducting staff meetings as well as how to take on board suggestions from staff meetings.
- The dispositions of teachers towards staff meetings need more interrogation using a qualitative approach to establish the 'why' behind teachers' responses.
- Future research should also focus on school heads' experiences in running staff meetings. So that by juxtaposing findings from research from teachers and school heads, practitioners could come up with more informed strategies on how interest in staff meetings could be cultivated and nurtured in teachers.

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