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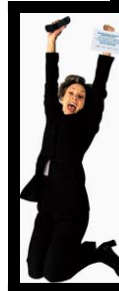
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Successful Meeting Strategies Newsletter

The Cove of Lake Geneva

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Eight ideas to manage controversies in meetings

Inevitably your organization will encounter controversies with respect to issues or changes under consideration. Controversy as such is not bad, but the way it is handled can determine whether your organization will emerge from the discussions bruised and divided, or healed, confident and united.

The following 8 ideas on managing controversies in meetings are based on "The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings," the definitive new guide for meetings and rules of order, published by the American Management Association.

1. Contact potentially disruptive individuals or factions prior to the meeting and seek to address any legitimate concerns. Reassure them that the meeting will be run fairly and ask for their support.
2. Set a constructive tone for the meeting. "The issues to come before us today are not easy. At the same time I am confident that - as highly dedicated individuals - we can work together, debate the issues rationally, and reach positive outcomes for the organization that we all love."
3. Remind members of the organization's mandate and values. Do so at the start of the meeting. Do so again if things become heated. "It would be helpful to remind ourselves of our mission statement, which says: . it behooves us to ask ourselves: Are we on track right now?"
4. Introduce guidelines at the start of the meeting and have them approved by the members: "Speak when recognized by the facilitator, focus on issues and not people, maintain civility and decorum."
5. See if contentious proposals can be modified (without compromising fundamental principles) to address valid concerns and integrate constructive suggestions.
6. Intervene decisively if members are disruptive: "Would you please focus on the issues and not the personalities?" "Can you give others the same respect that you want when you are speaking?"
7. Use affirmative language to convert criticisms into needs and interests. Instead of "You sound unhappy with our leadership" say "You seem to be suggesting that we could be more inclusive and better tuned to the needs of the stakeholders that we serve."
8. Make the room setup conducive to collaboration. Example: Replace parallel rows with round tables and see if you can break adversarial patterns by mixing the group's various factions.