

What If Faculty Meetings Were Voluntary?  
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I've posed this question to educators around the country, and 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. Always my question "What if faculty meetings were voluntary?" is met by laughter laced with incredulity.

Regardless of the setting or their role, they can't imagine that anyone would actually choose to go to faculty meetings if they had a choice. "Are you kidding me?" replied one teacher, "I'm gone." Her comment elicited several enthusiastic nods from those sitting nearby.

How would the teachers at *your* school react to this question? For that matter, would *you* attend your school's faculty meetings if attendance was voluntary, even if you were in charge of the meeting?

It's clear that for all of our rhetoric about turning schools into learning organizations and for all of our talk about embracing faculty collegiality, we have fallen short in making faculty meetings times for learning which are valued by everyone. In some respects, this is understandable, if not defensible: It takes far more time and energy to plan meetings that are meaningful, interactive, and engaging than it does to simply read from a script and share information. The last thing administrators have is enough time -- and everyone else is equally busy -- so it's no wonder that since faculty meetings are viewed as something that has to happen, it's best when they happen quickly. The jingling of car keys after about 40 minutes of a meeting 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 the fact that everyone has something else that needs to be done, faculty meetings can be productive and enjoyable. Too often, though, administrators fail to seize the potential of faculty meetings because they view them too narrowly and traditionally. If we are to capitalize on the potential of these meetings, we must reject the following myths:

*Myth #1. Faculty meetings are good times to share information.* We shouldn't use faculty meetings to share information that can be conveyed more efficiently in writing. Faculty meetings can be a time when clarifications are sought or questions are answered, but they should not be a time when bulletins are read or announcements are announced. Convening people so they can be read to is a disservice to everyone.

*Myth #2. Faculty meetings belong to administrators.* Administrators may lead faculty meetings but teachers should have input into the agenda and be responsible for presenting at meetings. Teachers should be able to share information about their successes and ask questions to help reduce their frustrations. At my school, a committee and I recently met to plan a faculty meeting devoted to multiple intelligences. Likewise, another group designed a faculty meeting to support our efforts in implementing a new approach to student behavior and building community. Each of these meetings was planned by teachers to tap into other's ideas and to get everyone on-board.

*Myth #3. Faculty meetings are times for administrators to be in charge.* Faculty meetings should be times when everyone leads and when teachers teach others. Teachers can present what they have learned at a workshop or talk about an article they have read. What better way could there be to help everyone grow than to give time to a department or grade-level team to share some new skills or information? Faculty 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 #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 from allocating ten minutes at the beginning of a meeting for teachers to talk in small groups in response to “What have you done in your classroom during the past week that makes you proud?” Each meeting a different question could be posed: “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 continues to the teachers’ lounge or parking lot.

*Myth #5. Faculty meetings are serious times, and a smile means we’re not being productive.* There’s a time to be serious and there’s a time to play, and that’s true for faculty meetings too. Some of each faculty meeting should be devoted to eliciting smiles and warmth. Whether beginning by asking people to talk to someone and share a success, opening the big bag of cookies and M&Ms, or telling a story that results in a laugh or a groan doesn’t matter. What does matter is that the meetings are enjoyable enough so that everyone looks forward to attending. Congeniality is the base of collegiality, and while the qualities are very different, it’s easier to develop collegiality when everyone enjoys one another. Faculty meetings are a time to develop the sense of team, to remind everyone that we’re all in this together.

We need to remember that we should apply the same principles to adult learning that we do to student learning. Learning occurs best when the learner is motivated, engaged, and when the lessons are developmentally appropriate. It’s much more difficult to engage learners who are just observers, so it’s important to get everyone involved in learning. Recently, for example, I began a faculty meeting by asking our teachers to define “joyful learning.” I continued, “It’s in our mission statement, but what does it mean to you and how do you pursue it in your classroom?” I asked them to spend a few minutes silently thinking, and then they met in groups to share their thoughts. I’ve also done this with questions about multiple intelligences, standardized achievement tests, school community, and student diversity. Consider also holding faculty meetings in various places within the school. Teachers can host meetings and share a bit about what happens in their space. Or perhaps a meeting can be held out of school. Sometimes a different setting can help set 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 the school culture, to remind everyone that we work hard and enjoy one another. And just maybe faculty meetings will be seen as so valuable that people are disappointed when one is cancelled.