

Seminar Techniques That Work

Unknown

The Masonic seminar has become an effective tool of Masonic education. Too frequently the seminar lacks the desired results because the discussion leaders are not properly versed in their duties. M.S.A. is happy to provide a "working tool" which can improve their effectiveness. The following Copyrighted article appeared in the July, 1983 issue of Successful Meetings Magazine. It was written by Robert Letwin, a wellknown and recognized authority in the field of meetings management.

LEADING IS TRICKY by Robert Letwin; Copyright 1983, Bill Communications, Inc. Reprinted by Special Permission.

You get a telephone call asking you to lead a group discussion at the next meeting. "What do I have to do?" you ask.

"The subject will be announced in advance. All you have to do is remind the group of the subject and then get everybody to talk. That's all."

It sounds easy enough, but don't be fooled. Your being a discussion leader is a tricky job. It takes skill and planning.

There are three major traps to ensnare an unskilled discussion leader. The first is that he takes on the role of a teacher instead of a discussion leader. (Since the discussion leader knows the subject well, it is easy to slip into this role. When that happens, discussion is dead.)

The second trap is to become an answer machine. Someone asks a question and you answer. The session devolves into an ask-the-expert program rather than a discussion.

Your third possible pitfall would be to become "the defender of the faith." Here you become an apologist for the status quo and disallow any discussion that reflects adversely on the organization. What you want to do as a discussion leader is to involve everyone in the audience. Give everyone an opportunity to speak and allow no one to monopolize discussion – especially yourself.

These are the steps you take for a good discussion:

1. State the objective of the discussion to the group and the area of discussion.

2. Explain that everyone participates, but there are to be no speeches.
3. To get started, you put a sharply defined question to the group. If no one responds, have an alternate question that is easy for anyone to answer. Resist entering into a monologue.
4. Test for the audience's objective. Is it the same as yours? If the audience would like to steer the discussion in another direction, make sure there is a consensus. If there is, discuss what the audience considers to be more important. Good discussion follows when everyone is agreed on what to talk about.
5. Keep in mind what you hope will be the outcome. Ask questions that will focus on the agreed upon objective.
6. Have a member of the group serve as a reporter to keep a running record of problems, issues, facts and decisions discussed. From time to time, have the reporter summarize. This is useful when the group starts to stray from the main topic.
7. Resort to easy-to-answer questions when discussion bogs down. For instance, ask a question about the time sequence, such as: "What comes first, and next?" You can also ask, "What is the biggest problem with ... ?" or, "What has been your experience with ... ?"
8. Ask for votes. Get a consensus on as many points as possible.
9. Don't rephrase what is offered by a group member. Repeat the statement exactly as it is given. (Resist inserting your words or editing comments. This can be intimidating. No one wants his words corrected in public. This also tends to stifle discussion.)
10. Don't feel that you have to cover everything you know about the subject. That's not the purpose of discussion. Rather, the aim is to have everyone in the audience participate. It is better to have a lively, well-explored segment of a subject than breeze along quickly without deep reflections.
11. Summarize with the help of the reporter. Point out problems raised during the discussion. List bright ideas. Point out areas of agreement and disagreement.
12. If some members of the group do not have the courage to speak up, draw them in with non-threatening questions. Ask them to share their experiences.
13. It is best to toss questions to the entire group. But, if you want to ask a quiet person to speak, call the person by name before you ask the question. Say, "John, what did you think when you first heard about ... ?" By starting with the person's name, you provide time for him to concentrate and think about an answer.
14. When someone tends to monopolize discussion, politely interrupt and ask someone else in the audience to comment on the monopolizer's statements. Allow the audience

to straighten out its members instead of your doing it. Too tight a rein will cut off discussion.

15. Feel good about not covering all the points you had written in advance. This means you have led a wholesome discussion and were not prompted to inject your opinions in favor of those in the group.

Copyright, 1983, Successful Meetings, Bill Communications, Inc., 633 Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017. Used by special permission.

It's good practical advice which works well in the business community and should readily be adaptable for use by discussion leaders in Masonic Conferences, seminars, workshops and meetings.

Some other techniques for conducting successful Masonic seminars also are based upon common sense. Plan early ... and constantly. Be prepared for every eventuality ... facilities ... equipment ... back-up personnel ... hand-out materials ... advance publicity ... registration ... first aid facilities ... inclement weather ... coffee breaks ... parking ... sound systems ... audio-visuals ... "no-show" speakers ... alternative plans ... and the list goes on.

Any seminar must have a logical PURPOSE and attainable GOALS. The participants must be made aware of those purposes and goals. It is well to announce them in the "call" of the meeting, at the start of the session, and to review them during the course of the seminar. It helps to keep things "on track" and to keep the participants involved.

The physical arrangements of the meeting place must be such that everyone can see and hear. Distractions should be kept to a minimum. One recent Wardens' Workshop was being held in a Conference Motel. The conference room had windows which overlooked the swimming pool. In and around the pool were some wonderful examples of "heavenly bodies" clad in bikinis, which were more of a distraction than could be controlled by the discussion leader. He quickly summarized the points of discussion and reminded the Junior Wardens that it was the sun "at meridian" they were to observe. The Senior Wardens he reminded were to "see that none go away dissatisfied." The break was a bit longer than scheduled, but when the session reconvened, curtains covered the windows.

Lessons must be learned as the result of every seminar. What works well can be used at subsequent workshops. What doesn't work well must be modified, or possibly eliminated. The plans, the execution and conduct, and the results of each such meeting should be analyzed and evaluated, so that the following sessions will more adequately meet the purposes and goals.

To help in this after action process, some seminar planners find that a questionnaire evaluation by the participants at the close of a seminar helps to identify the strong points and the weaknesses of the program. It provides them with an added "working tool" when planning for the next one.

Planning is the key to success. The designs must be placed on the trestleboard carefully – and revised – as needed.

STB - October 1983