

The Standing Meeting

by David L. Smallen

As our environments become more distributed and team-based, how can we foster staff “togetherness” and a more coordinated approach to delivering information services? At Hamilton College, the “standing meeting” has become a “standing” management practice that has helped to meet these challenges.

Providing excellent information services has become an increasingly team-oriented activity—little can be accomplished by individuals operating in isolation. Rather, providing excellent services requires the coordinated efforts of many individuals, each contributing his or her particular expertise, talents, and perspectives. Teams change from day to day, and providing mechanisms so that these team members can maintain contact is a challenge. Even in small organizations, once the day begins everyone scatters around the campus, and maintaining contact, even electronically, becomes problematic. Also, individuals are often physically separated from each other, perhaps as a result of moving support personnel closer to the users, or due to a scarcity of appropriate office space, or because formerly separate organizations have been consolidated but not co-located. Whatever the reason, there needs to be a mechanism for keeping the *entire* organization moving in the same direction on a regular, consistent basis and facilitating team work. Part of a solution can be the “standing” meeting. This is a technique that I, and other colleagues who have tried it, have found to be an amazingly simple and effective means of building organizational cohesion and improving the delivery of services. Any organization—small or large—can do this!

At Hamilton College, there are fourteen individuals who are collectively responsible for providing computing, telephone, networking, and institutional research services to the college community. Each morning at 8:45 our *entire organization* gets together for a meeting that generally lasts from five to fifteen minutes. The three main purposes of the meeting are: (1) to provide anyone with an opportunity to make an announcement, particularly about something that might affect others in the organization, (2) to enable any team of individuals to get together (generally right after the meeting) to plan the delivery of some service, and (3) to allow everyone to see one another at least once during each day.

Announcements do not have to be profound or earth-shaking. Some recent examples included: computers were to be installed in a particular department that day; the power was off for a period of time over the weekend and everyone should be aware that people who forgot to reset their surge suppressors will be calling in with “computer” problems; or that the latest survey about the help-desk services was very positive. Announcing who is on vacation, or sick that day, is something that we do every day.

Interestingly—and especially if this technique is used every day—there are many times in which there are few announcements. I sometimes have to prod people to announce something that they know, and that I think might be important to the group. Some of this reticence to speak comes from personality dynamics, which are always interesting to observe and which often change over time. Nevertheless, the most consistent value of the morning meeting is getting everyone in one room so they can find each other. Once the day begins, they scatter to their various responsibilities around the campus.

Some tips for success

Make sure the meeting is short. One way to accomplish this is to conduct the meeting in a place where all or most people have to stand (hence the origin of the term “standing” meeting). This reinforces the notion that this is not a meeting in which to relax or get comfortable, but rather to get geared up for the day.

Encourage brief announcements rather than long pronouncements. Don’t use this meeting to do strategic planning. If someone begins to go into great detail, suggest that he e-mail everyone, or arrange for another meeting time. This provides practice for everyone in organizing their thoughts in a concise manner—something that is valuable professional development.

Encourage announcements that bring insight into services being provided, especially ones that will help others in the organization understand a service area that they are not generally involved



David L. Smallen
(dsmallen@hamilton.edu)
is Director, Information Technology Services and Institutional Research at Hamilton College. In this capacity he is responsible for the planning and management of academic and administrative computing resources, campus voice and data communications, and institutional research.

For Successful Standing Meetings:

- ✓ Make sure the meeting is short
- ✓ Encourage *brief* announcements
- ✓ Encourage announcements related to services
- ✓ Don't worry if there aren't always substantive announcements
- ✓ Use the meetings to recognize birthdays and other special events
- ✓ Hold the meeting regardless of who can attend
- ✓ Schedule the meeting at the beginning of the day

in. Even in a small organization, it is easy for people to feel "out of the loop."

Don't worry if there aren't many substantive announcements each day. The main purpose of the meeting is to get everyone together. This was an area that I worried about quite a bit when I first started using this technique. I was so concerned about information flow that I kept trying various ways to encourage it, for example, by having each person take turns telling about something they were working on. This was artificial and didn't take hold.

Just when I was ready to despair, and considered dropping the whole idea, my staff pointed out that I was missing the most important part of the meeting for them—namely the opportunity to get together, get to know each other, and plan the delivery of services.

Use the standing meeting to recognize birthdays and other special events. We have a cake for each person's birthday, and the standing meeting provides a reminder that the birthday person has to cut the cake before others can eat. However, the morning meeting shouldn't be a substitute for a party at other times.

Hold the standing meeting regardless of who can make it. Vacations, illness, etc. will mean that not everyone can attend every meeting. The value of the meeting is for those who *can* attend. Knowing that this meeting will take place makes it possible for members of the organization to plan to get together each day.

Schedule the meeting at the beginning of the day, before everyone on campus begins to request services. Regular activities should not conflict with this meeting. This is an important activity for members of the organization, and it should be possible for them to attend almost all the time.

Variations on a theme

Colleagues who have tried this technique at other institutions have reported a very positive reaction by their staffs. Each site has modified the technique in some way, usually in the frequency in which the meeting takes place. Regardless of the exact implementation method, providing regular opportunities for *all* members of the organization to get together encourages teamwork, and teamwork is central to delivering excellent services.

Stampedging...

(continued from page 42)

had lines for my name, address, and other demographic information. It indicated that permission was being given for Dr. (left blank) to release the following information (left blank) to the following recipients (left blank). The waiting room was filled with anxious people; each one signed the form without questioning the procedure ... with one exception.

Personal information is increasingly becoming a commodity, a thing which benefits not only the person to whom the information refers, but also those who seek to use that information. Indeed, in this information age, personal information is becoming a *commercial* commodity from which a second entity can make a profit. Consent, therefore, must be given knowledgeably and with full understanding, not under duress in an unbalanced power relationship, or in ignorance of its implications. The importance of this act of giving consent must be endorsed and supported by universities and colleges as we travel the EDI trail.

Some administrators have already indicated that following this trail may take precedence over fulfilling the letter, or even the intent, of their responsibilities at this time. This would indeed be a loss, for higher education has the opportunity to lead the way, to set the pace, and determine the direction in the electronic handling of student, faculty, and staff personal data. We need to ask what is driving this stampede at this time, and we need to determine how to influence the movement both in destination and route.

Conclusion

University and college administrators will need to confirm their own purpose and direction in the stampede to electronic data interchange. They will need to stay the course, avoiding the enticements of secondary and inappropriate uses of data. They will surely seek to fulfill the responsibilities of their roles according to law, standards, and policies and do so in the face of technology that may only partially fit their needs. Insisting that they keep to the highest ethical ground, empowering individuals over institutions or corporations, and maintaining the trust of their communities, will be the surest route to success.

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