Meeting standards

I spend a lot of time at meetings; it is probably a normal part of the ageing process. It also seems that some names are put onto a generic list of people who are often included in discussions on a wide range of topics. Personally I think that it is preferable, when asked, to participate in meetings or serve on committees rather than to remain on the outside and complain about the outcome. And if you do not fall asleep during the meeting but actively participate you will probably be invited to more. However, many meetings would be significantly more productive—and even more enjoyable—if all participants could adhere to some basic standards of behaviour.

I am serious about not sleeping. It always amazes me to see someone take a little nap right in the middle of a debate. Of course, the inevitable ringing of a mobile phone eventually wakes these sleepers up. There was a time when mobile phones were a rarity, followed quickly by the phase when their ringtones became the Muzak™ of meetings. Finally, and to everyone's relief, the 'mute' button was discovered, but now a vibration signals a committee member to catapult out of the chair to the lobby while talking on the phone. This is a real disruption during discussions and it shows that the priority given to the phone puts the meeting in second place.

A more recent development is the increasingly ubiquitous presence of laptops, which have become a similar nuisance. They are, of course, a great tool for digging out missing information and they greatly reduce the amount of paper we have to carry around the globe. But often these aids are used to surf the web or read the news. Although openly reading a newspaper during a meeting would be considered extremely rude, some still seem to think that it is acceptable to sneak a quick read of the latest sports or political

news online. I do not think it is. The pervasiveness of BlackBerries® is further exacerbating this problem as some cannot switch off their dependence on constant drip-feed of e-mail.

Of course, it can be necessary to consult with a neighbour during a meeting, but loud and persistent personal discussions are a distraction for all and insulting to the speaker. And for some peculiar reason, those speaking in a foreign language seem to lose control of the volume. This is another example of bad meeting manners.

Then there is the ever-present problem of conflict of interest in grant review panels, when a candidate is being considered by a selection board that includes his or her colleague. Some panel members handle such situations appropriately and immediately leave the room. Some need a reminder from the Chair. But there are still those who argue that there is no real conflict and act injured if someone suggests that their presence may influence the outcome in some way. Others leave, but not before making a short speech to highlight a few positive things about the candidate, who thus has an unfair advantage not available to the other applicants. Again, they are not meeting standards.

A variant of these examples is the individual who does not sleep, turns off the phone, closes the laptop and leaves when there is a potential conflict of interest—but who has not bothered to read the background papers for the meeting. Unfortunately, this seems to be generally true. Participants' failure to inform themselves before the meeting is obvious when they ask for something that has already been provided in the documents or when they voice opinions that ignore previous discussions by the group on the same topic. Obviously it is better if all participants have the same common foundation of information.

Another consequence of ignoring background information is that policy can start to dangerously zigzag: what was a good idea at the last meeting suddenly becomes a bad idea at the next, and the group ends up with a contrary decision. As most committees have rather long lives, it is therefore important to establish a memory system and bring previous material to the attention of all participants before the next meeting is convened. But that presumes that documents are read. Alternatively, it could be the Chair's task to point out these documents when it appears that members are ignoring the wisdom of the past. This would be better than the inevitable embarrassment when the light finally dawns on the person who has not bothered to read all the relevant material.

This problem becomes even more annoying when a chain of decision-making is involved. When a topic moves to another set of experts or committee for implementation and ratification, ignoring the advice and conclusions from previous meetings sends a confused message. Recent events in Europe are a good example: the heads of EU member states concluded that the future of the continent depends on investing more into research, but then gave it a low priority when they discussed the budget (Gannon F (2005) *Where's the beef? EMBO Rep* 6: 689).

As this is the first editorial of 2006, I would like to make a wish. In addition to the standard desires for peace, good health, happiness and success for friends and family, I wish that the irritations outlined above would disappear. If meeting participants prepare for the exercise and concentrate on the task at hand, I am sure the gains in productivity for everyone will be significant and we will all have a happier 2006.

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doi:10.1038/sj.embor.7400603