

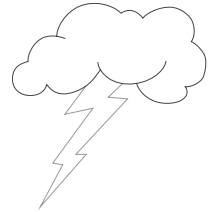
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# 1

## Why Energize?

*The best leaders . . . almost without exception and at every level are master users of stories and symbols.*

—Tom Peters



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Kevin, a middle-level principal, always dreaded getting his staff together for meetings. Most of the time, the members of his staff just sat and listened as he talked about upcoming events and tasks that needed to be tackled in his school. Sometimes, he had a hard time getting people to talk at all during his meetings. When the staff meetings were over, Kevin found that he had not solved any of the problems or issues that he had called the meeting to deal with in the first place.

His teachers also did not look forward to the meetings. Many of the staff members were open about the fact that the meetings were a waste of time. Because many of the staff members had worked with Kevin for a long time, they had resigned themselves to the fact that meetings would always be boring.

Karla, on the other hand, had a much different situation happening in her meetings. The staff members at Karla's school met regularly but for short periods of time. Each of her meetings had a clear and focused agenda. Each of her meetings started with an opening activity to connect her staff members. At the end of the meeting, strategies were normally put in place to help teachers review the accomplishments of the session. Karla helped her staff members learn how to connect emotionally and use the unique strengths and talents present in the teaching staff. Tasks were addressed and accomplished during her meetings.

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In each of the preceding scenarios, a different perspective on staff meetings was illustrated. What made Kevin's meetings so ineffective, whereas Karla was able to make her meetings a place where staff members could learn to work together and solve problems as a team? In this book, we will explore the secrets of making staff meetings engaging and energizing experiences.

Good leaders know how to motivate their staff members. One effective way to motivate staff is to conduct energized staff meetings. Because of a variety of factors, many leaders find it difficult to conduct energized staff meetings. This book is designed to help school and district-level leaders to be successful in improving their meetings. In this chapter, you will learn the following:

- Reasons why leaders don't always conduct energized staff meetings
- The positive effects of energized staff meetings
- The positive effects of building a strong staff culture
- The impact of energized meetings on you, the leader
- How the information in this book can help you to improve your staff meetings

## **What Is an Energized, Effective Staff Meeting?**

An energized, effective staff meeting is an experience in which team members are engaged and actively involved in the content and substance of the meeting. It is also a situation in which all of the minds of the staff members are connecting and working together to solve problems and to move the organization forward in its goals and objectives. An energized staff meeting may look very calm on the surface, or it may be filled with all kinds of physical and mental activities. At times, meeting leaders need to inject energizing strategies into a meeting to get people to connect and be creative, whereas in other instances, the same leaders need to provide activities and experiences that mentally engage participants in the meeting content.

Sometimes, meeting leaders get themselves into trouble because they think they need to entertain their teachers during their meetings. They feel they are a failure if people are not on the edge of their seats during the whole meeting. The need to entertain can turn some people off to the concept of energizing meetings; this can cause meeting leaders to do nothing rather than try to make their meetings more engaging.

This book was written to serve as a practical guide to help you, the meeting leader, get the minds of your staff members engaged in the meeting content. There are activities listed here that may require a group to be physically active, whereas others are more low key in nature. The ideas with less physical activity engage a group but in a different way than the more active energizers. It is up to you to decide when to use specific strategies to help your group through a particular phase or situation that they may be facing. Remember, your goal is to get their minds active and connected; how you do that in your building may be different from how others do it in their settings.

## **What Keeps Leaders From Conducting Energized Staff Meetings?**

### **Discomfort With Trying New Ideas**

In some instances, the leader may be reluctant to try new ideas with staff. After all, once the patterns of meeting behaviors have been set, a certain amount of comfort is established. It can be hard for some people to break out of these “normal” behaviors and try some new ideas. Implementing energizing activities takes a leader who is interested in changing the status quo. Schools can become stagnant places where people are positively reinforced for not “rocking the boat.” A leader who wants to try energizing activities needs to look at the school staff members and decide that they need to be shaken up a little. To be successful in conducting energized staff meetings, the leader has to find a way to put this discomfort behind him or her and to work through new ideas. Thomas Kuhn, in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996), presented a model that can be used to explain and understand the process people go through in examining new ideas or changes. The following general steps have been adapted from Kuhn’s work:

- The person or group of people experience information or data.
- The mind begins to draw conclusions based on the information.
- These conclusions or generalizations continue to be strengthened until they form a way of thinking or frame of reference.
- A comfort zone is established by having a frame of reference to guide thinking on a topic or topics.
- Something in the environment changes that contradicts or challenges the person’s or group’s frame of reference.
- The person or group tries to justify the existing thought pattern or frame of reference by bending or changing the incoming information to fit the old thought pattern.

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- After many attempts to bend or change the information, the person or group begins to see that the old way of thinking is outdated, and a new frame of reference is formed around the new ideas or information that have been picked up by the group members.
- The process remains stable until the next challenge to the new frame of reference is presented.



In essence, we all can become comfortable with the way things are going. Even when the existing state is not all that great, it is at least predictable. We may be more comfortable with a predictable situation that is not positive than with one that holds the potential to be positive but is unknown at this time. This process can work against leaders, who may be comfortable with boring and ineffective meetings because they are predictable. They may be uncomfortable trying something new because there is some amount of uncertainty.

It is far easier to keep doing the same things, even if they don't work, than to work to implement change. Here are some strategies others have found beneficial when working through the discomfort of changing their staff meetings and implementing energizing staff meetings:

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#### Strategies to Overcome Self-Reluctance

- Worst-case scenario analysis: Examine the worst thing that could happen as a result of trying an energizing activity. If you can live with the worst-case scenario, try the new idea.
  - Best-case scenario analysis: Examine the best things that could happen as a result of trying a new, energizing activity with your staff. If the outcome is worth the effort, go ahead and give the new idea a try.
  - Idea familiarization: To help you work past the "information bending" stage described previously, review the new idea or ideas several times and think about how the energizing activities could fit into your leadership behavior. This will help you work through the process of implementing a new idea and keep you from blocking the change.
  - Partner assistance: Engage a partner in helping you to evaluate and implement a new idea for your staff. Asking someone to work with you will help you to productively work through the issues that normally appear as you implement new ideas or strategies.
  - Staff collaboration: Many leaders enlist the help of teachers as they implement new ideas. These leaders can use the support of teacher-leaders to sell and implement new ideas. Consider how one leader we recently worked with used staff member support and expertise to implement a new meeting strategy.
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After seeing that his staff needed to find ways to work together more productively, Rod formed a committee to study the problem. At their first meeting, the teachers on the committee told Rod that the staff meetings were not seen as productive. Rod asked the teachers to suggest ideas for changing staff meetings. Several of the staff members suggested that openers be used to get the meetings started in a productive manner. Three teachers volunteered to introduce the concept of openers at the next staff meeting.

At the next meeting, these teachers presented the idea of implementing openers. Several teachers expressed concerns about the process, but in general, the staff agreed that having opening activities at their staff meetings could be good. Rod was able to move the concept forward without putting himself out on a limb. The small group of teachers was able to take the initial "heat" for the new idea while helping to move it forward. If Rod had been seen as the initiator of the idea, he may have run into resistance.

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### **Negative Staff Reactions**

Leaders are not the only people in schools who are reluctant to try new ideas; teachers also don't like to move out of their comfort zones. At times, this reluctance can be quite strong. People may exhibit very negative behaviors to get a leader to move back into their comfort zone. They are good at figuring out the "threshold of pain" a leader will tolerate before he or she gives up on an idea and moves back on the plan to conduct energizing staff meetings. If the teachers know that their negative attitudes may cause the leader to abandon a new idea, they will do whatever they can to make the new idea fail. Negative behaviors may range from simple eye rolling to observable defiance of the new strategies. John recently had such an experience with a group of office workers who showed defiance in engaging in team-building activities.

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As John was explaining that the office workers needed to get to know each other and build collaborative relationships, several of them looked at each other in disgust. They were rolling their eyes, and several made jokes about the activity that was being proposed. John suspended his judgment of their comments and had everyone meet in the hall. After he started the activity, one of the more abrasive members of the group said, "I am not doing this activity." John said, "OK, just follow along with the rest of us."

As the group moved through the activity, it was obvious the negative person looked foolish just walking along. In a minute or so, she grabbed

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onto one the ropes for the device that the group was moving. John made no comment, and the other office workers didn't say anything to her as well. After the activity was over, she waited around until the other employees left. She said to John, "In the future, please let me know what you are planning to do, so I can get myself ready." John agreed to do that. He offered her a chance to be involved in the planning committee for future activities; she agreed and became a supporter of future activities.

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Although this story may seem too good to be true, by allowing this worker some space, she was able to work through her negative feelings about participating. In this case, if John had made a big deal out of her comment about not participating, she would have resisted. If John had become more forceful in getting her to engage, a small battle could have erupted. The staff members may have backed her, and the situation easily could have gotten out of control. In this case, by not making a big deal out of her resistance, John was able to help her work through it. Because he knew the personality of the office worker, he knew how to handle the situation.

Here are some strategies and techniques that you may consider using when facing reluctant staff members. Remember that it is crucial for you to evaluate the situation before selecting a strategy to deal with it.

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### Techniques to Deal with Negative Staff Reactions

- Practice suspension of opinion.

A good technique to use in dealing with staff reluctance is the suspension of opinion. With this skill, you control your inner feelings of anxiety and ignore the eye rolling and negative comments. This can be a hard skill to learn and implement, but it also can be highly effective in dealing with negative emotions. With the suspension of opinion, it is important for you to believe that implementing energizing activities will be good for your teachers. Suspension is based on the reinforcement theory of extinction: What you ignore will go away. At times, we have seen leaders and staff members get into arguments right in the middle of a staff meeting because the leader decided to respond to a negative comment made by a staff member.

As you get ready to implement energizing activities with your staff, think through all of the possible negative comments you may get and who you think may make them. This will help you to ignore the comments and move your group forward.

- Explain the reasons for doing the activities.

As with any new practice, it is important to explain to your staff members why you are implementing it in their staff meetings. Be sure to talk about the benefits that your teachers will gain as a result of getting more engaged and involved in the staff meetings. Let them know that you want to make their meetings a place where everyone can feel comfortable and share in generating solutions to the problems the school faces. Finally, be sure to tell them that you want them to have some fun in their meetings. Implementing energizing activities will enable them to have some fun and learn at the same time.

- Ask the staff to list their concerns; address these concerns.

Sometimes, teachers may have legitimate concerns about getting involved in more energizing and engaging staff meetings. Some of your teachers may have experienced some of the self-awareness activities so famous during earlier times in education. Although many of these programs were good at what they were trying to accomplish, others were not followed up in any systematic manner. Other staff members may have legitimate concerns about the types of activities you are proposing. Some of your teachers may even have health concerns that need to be taken into account.



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If you believe there are concerns that need to be addressed in the group before moving on with energizing activities, be sure to hold an open meeting to get those concerns out and addressed before moving forward. See how one principal, Carol, conducted her meeting to make sure that all of the staff concerns about her new ideas for staff meetings were addressed.

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Right after she explained that the basic structure for staff meetings was going to change, Carol told the teachers that she wanted to hear their concerns about the new idea. She divided the teachers into groups of five and asked them to work together to generate a list of concerns about implementing energizing activities in future meetings. She also asked them to talk about the ways that these concerns could be overcome. Finally, she told the small groups that she wanted them to generate a list of possible benefits to the staff that implementing energizing activities could bring. After about 10 minutes, she had each team report its findings. Several legitimate concerns were brought out, but other teams had solutions for these concerns. In the end, the teachers saw that their concerns had been addressed in a positive and energizing manner. The new meeting activities were well received.

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## **Embed Positive Statements to Help Frame the Thinking of Group Members**

As the leader, your attitude goes a long way toward framing the thought patterns of your teachers. If you approach the new activities with excitement and interest, they will fall in line as well. You can embed positive statements into your introduction of the activities that will set the stage for their success. Here are some statements that you may find helpful as you introduce new energizing activities:

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### **Helpful Introductory Statements**

- You are really going to learn a lot about our group as we . . .
- The next activity will help you to . . .
- As we get ready to move into . . . be sure to think about how it can help us work together better as a team.
- You will really like . . .
- As you work together in teams during the next activity, be sure to look for . . .
- This is going to be fun and help you learn . . .
- Because you have done so well working together in the past, we will move to the next level . . .
- To energize our thinking and problem-solving skills today . . .
- As you get into your problem-solving groups . . .

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At times, we apologize for allowing our teachers to work together effectively and experience good staff meetings. Here are some examples that tend to “turn off” the thinking of staff members and make them feel negative about their participation in activities:

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### **Introductory Statements That Negatively Frame the Thoughts of Meeting Participants**

- I know that you have some concerns about participating today in . . .
  - You may not want to do this, but . . .
  - This may seem goofy to you . . .
  - In the past, we have had bad experiences with this type of activity, but . . .
  - I am sure that you will not want to do this . . .
  - The last time we tried this, several of you giggled . . .
  - You probably don’t want to do this, but . . .
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As you read these statements, you may be thinking, "Why would anyone say these kinds of things when introducing activities?" Believe it or not, we find these kinds of statements to be very common with leaders and their teachers. Some leaders are not even aware they are saying them until we point it out to them. The most common reason leaders make these negative statements is nervousness. Think through how you plan to introduce the use of energizing activities so that you can frame them as positive rather than negative. With careful planning, you can avoid making mistakes by "winging" the introductory section of the meeting and possibly turning people off by making inappropriate statements.

### **Lack of Knowledge or Strategies**

In the typical administrator or leader training session, very little information is provided about energizing staff meetings. Because most leaders have not been exposed to this type of training, it is not surprising that leaders have limited knowledge about this topic. This book has been developed as a guide to help you learn and implement energizing activities with your teachers.

## **Positive Impacts of Energized Meetings on Staff, School Climate, and Culture**

Energizing activities have positive effects on staff members. This section describes some of the major positive impacts of energized staff meetings.

### **Promotes Good Feelings About Meetings**

Implementing energizing activities helps to build good feelings about staff meetings. People begin to look forward to having some fun and getting their work accomplished when they know that energizing activities are being implemented.

### **Creates Favorable Impressions of the Leader**

Like it or not, many of your staff members see you in limited situations. Because you are involved in a variety of activities throughout the day, your teachers' perceptions of your leadership abilities are based on seeing you in a variety of limited situations. The staff meeting time you have set aside may be the longest amount of uninterrupted time your staff members have with you. If your meetings are energetic

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and engaging, your teachers will perceive you as effective; if not, they will begin to think that you are not a good leader.

### **Models Effective Behaviors for Teachers**

Our teachers learn a lot by following the examples of others. If your run boring, dull meetings yet tell them they need to engage their students in interesting instruction, you are communicating mixed messages to them. If, on the other hand, your teachers see you challenging them by conducting productive and energized staff meetings, they will begin to see what you mean. The old phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” applies here.

In addition to implementing good, on-track energizing activities, it is important that you take the time to point out what you are doing in your staff meetings and why you are implementing these activities. These explanations don’t need to be long to be effective. See how the leader in the following example points out why the teachers are engaging in an energizing activity:

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It is important that we focus on the positive aspects of our school in order to grow and learn as a staff. We are going to use a technique called “Good News” to open our meeting. In small groups of six, I want each of you to share something good that happened to you in relation to our school during the last month. After you are finished, I want you to be ready to share two or three of the Good News items you heard with the entire faculty.

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In this case, the principal asked the teachers to talk about a positive event related to their work in the school. The purpose of this activity was to help teachers begin to draw out the good things about the school in order to build a positive culture. She summed up that outcome in her introductory statement. If the principal models positive talk, then teachers will follow along and begin to do the same.

The idea of modeling effective behaviors is a topic that may require more information than the scope of this book allows, but in general, teachers look to you, the leader, to show them what you mean. Implementing energizing activities provides the perfect vehicle for doing this with your teachers.

## **Gives Teachers Strategies to Try in Their Classrooms**

Implementing energizing activities can also give teachers ideas for activities that they can use in their classrooms. In our work with teacher groups, we have found that people are hungry for ideas and strategies that they can use in their classrooms. Today's teachers are looking for ways to help students break down communication barriers and work together as a learning community. The energizers that you use at your staff meetings can be easily adapted for use in classrooms of every level. Some leaders take the time to point out how these strategies can be implemented in classrooms, whereas others ask the teachers to take a few minutes at the end of an activity to talk about how the idea or strategy could be used in their classrooms. See how Julie, the principal of a middle school, involved her staff members in thinking about how an activity could be used with their students:

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We have been working in our school to help our students see how they can help each other out. Take a minute to talk in pairs about how you think we could adapt the activity that we just finished, Toxic Waste Transfer, to help our houses learn how to work together.

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By asking the teachers to generate ideas, Julie helped them to personalize the strategy and develop their own ideas. They were more invested in the idea than if Julie had said, "This is a great idea, you all need to use it with your students." Julie could have provided more assistance to her staff members by offering to make some Toxic Waste Transfer kits or by purchasing the materials for those interested in making their own kits.

## **Builds Collegiality and Community**

Obviously, once people are allowed to work together and interact, the level of collegiality will increase. When implementing energizing activities, it is crucial that you have people work in groups that vary in membership. Most of the energizing activities highlighted in this book require teachers to get to know their colleagues in a deeper and more meaningful way. Collegiality and community can be built through this higher level of knowledge and understanding. Be sure to watch how your teachers interact as you continue to implement

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energizing activities with them. You will see an increased level of understanding of one another and more collegiality as they work together.

### **Helps People Deal With Negative Situations in a Positive Manner**

When your teachers are engaged in energized staff meetings, they can see things in a different light and begin to look for positive resolutions to problems. As we have worked with faculty groups, we have noticed that through the implementation of energizing activities, teachers become better at solving problems. When energizing problem-solving strategies are used, more people are involved in developing solutions to problems. The expectation that all staff members have a stake in solving problems evolves as a result of energized staff meetings. Many of the activities presented in this book work toward getting everyone involved in positive problem resolution.

### **Gives People Some Sense of Control Over Their Environment**

Teachers sometimes feel they have little or no control over their work environment. The schedule is established for them, their students are determined in advance, and the principal tells them what they can and can't do. By conducting staff meetings that are more interactive and energizing, some of the control over the workplace is given back to the teachers. In some of the schools in which we have helped staff members learn how to work together in energized staff meetings, the teachers have actually been placed in charge of implementing those changes. By being in charge of their own activities, teachers gain some control over their environment. This can be a very motivating and exciting prospect for teachers.

In addition to giving people control over their environment, we have seen some very innovative activities develop when teachers are put in charge of generating the energizing activities. In two groups we recently worked with, a small subgroup was given the assignment to start each meeting by introducing an energizer. People looked forward to these energizers, and because the staff members were responsible for generating the ideas, the other teachers were receptive to the activities that were presented. The staff members told us that they felt they were in control of a part of the agenda; this is one

of the reasons we had asked staff members to generate energizers in the first place.

## **The Impact of Energized Meetings on You, the Leader**

### **You Look Forward to Meetings**

Leaders who implement energizing activities seem to become energized themselves. These leaders actually begin to look forward to meetings rather than see them as negative experiences. It is exciting to watch your staff members have fun and work together. Your staff meetings become places where real solutions to problems emerge rather than places for people to complain. The time you allot for your staff meetings seems to fly by when you have people engaged in exciting and energizing activities. In general, you will look forward to meeting and working with your teachers in your meetings as a result of implementing energizing activities.

### **You Are Motivated and Energized**

Implementing energizing activities also rubs off on the leader. Many leaders will join in the activities that they ask their teachers to participate in during staff meetings. If you do join in, you will feel the increased energy that your staff members are experiencing. Even if you don't join in right away, you will enjoy watching your staff members get excited during your meetings. This can be energizing in itself. Let yourself go and allow the newfound energy to influence you as well as your teachers.

### **You See the Positive Impact of Your Leadership on Staff Members**

Most of us get into leadership positions to help people grow and learn. If you implement energizing activities with your teachers, you will immediately see the results of your leadership efforts. This instant feedback tends to motivate school leaders and reminds them that their primary job is to be the "lead teacher" of the teachers. A motivated staff, in turn, will do a better job with the children—the real reason we are in this business in the first place.



## How to Use This Book to Improve Your Staff Meetings

This book was written as a guide for you to use in your quest to add energy to your staff meetings. The activities listed here have been successfully implemented in a variety of settings in schools and educational organizations around the country. Each of the leaders who has tried these ideas has taken the unique needs and characteristics of his or her staff into account before putting these ideas into practice. Make sure that you carefully read through the descriptions and the background information for each activity and then evaluate how the technique may work in your particular situation. The context for each activity is important to your success in implementing it.

Also, keep in mind the readiness level of your teachers for energizing activities. Like any new idea, you will need to build up their readiness and understanding with simple, easy-to-implement activities before moving to more complex ideas. Move your staff along at a pace that is comfortable for them to ensure success.

This book has been designed to provide you with activities that you may find helpful at different stages in the meeting process. In Chapter 2, "Barriers to Good Staff Meetings and How to Overcome Them," you will learn how to deal with the most common problems that get in the way of implementing energized staff meeting activities. In Chapter 3, "Great Beginnings," you will learn how to start off an energized staff meeting on the right foot. Chapter 4, "Keeping the Group Engaged," will help you maintain the energy level throughout the meeting. Chapter 5, "Building on the Positive Emotional Connections of Staff Members," will provide ideas and techniques to help you further your work in developing a collaborative community of teachers by using emotionally based energizers to connect your teachers in a powerful way.

The information contained in Chapter 6, "Extended Meetings . . . When You Have More Time," has been selected for use in meetings that go beyond the normal hour to hour and a half that is set aside for most staff meetings. Many leaders find that these longer meetings involve staff development or opening-day sessions and provide a challenge to keeping people energized and connected. Closing down a meeting in an energizing manner is the topic of Chapter 7, "Closing the Meeting With a Bang," which will provide you with the ideas you need to ensure that the energy you have worked to build during the entire meeting is not lost at the very end. People always remember the beginning and the end, so we want to make sure that they will remember that your meeting ended in a positive and energized manner.

Finally, Chapter 8, "Closing Thoughts and Next Steps," will sum up the information presented in this book and give you practical ideas about how to move forward in your efforts to engage your staff members in energized meetings.

## Summary

In this chapter, you began your journey on the rewarding road to energizing your staff meetings and helping your staff to grow and learn. As you can see from your reading, the effects of energizing your staff meetings are positive and worth the effort. Conducting energized staff meetings not only makes the meeting experience more fun and rewarding but also helps to build the collegiality and collaborative skills of your participants.

As you will see in Chapter 2, there are many barriers that can work against you and undermine your efforts to energize your staff meetings. With the information that you will learn in the next chapter, you will be armed to deal with these barriers and to turn your staff meetings into productive and positive experiences for you and the staff you lead.