

Case Study 19:

The Meeting Gone Wrong

Background

In August, out of concern about the rising rates of Alzheimer's disease in seniors, and the recent death by exposure of a woman who wandered away from her home, the City of Moose Jaw Council made a decision: Council directed the Moose Jaw Health Unit to research and assess the amount and type of community services available for those living with Alzheimer's. The health unit is expecting to receive the funding for the research report by October, so a meeting with all stakeholders (such as the Alzheimer's Association, local seniors' activity centres, and representatives of the hospital and health clinics) has to be held in September to discuss how to put together the report. The report is to be delivered to Council by December.

Current Situation

As the manager of the Moose Jaw Health Unit, Rebecca Thorne has the responsibility of organizing and facilitating the meeting. Her agenda for the meeting is shown in Exhibit A.

The Problem

Rebecca schedules the meeting for 3 p.m. on a Tuesday at the Moose Jaw Health Unit. She emails the agenda to the stakeholders, some of whom have never been to the Moose Jaw Health Unit before, at 4 p.m. the day before the meeting. Most of these people are health professionals, seniors' advocates, and Alzheimer's organization representatives, and most work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. No directions to the facility are included in the email.

At the meeting, Rebecca is asked whether there is any coffee or tea. She has not provided any, which prompts a few people to leave to run next door to Tim Hortons—not returning for 20 minutes. Rebecca has not provided copies of the agenda, so those who forgot to bring a copy have to share with others. The room for the meeting is suitable for a capacity of 75 people, and of the 30 people invited, only eight have shown up. Attendees are spread out among the 35 chairs set out lecture style for the meeting. The room is too hot, as it's an unseasonably warm October day, and the air conditioning has been shut down for fall and winter. The chairs are rigid and uncomfortable.

Rebecca starts the meeting without the four people who left for Tim Hortons—leaving only four participants besides herself. Rebecca begins by saying that she really doesn't know what council is looking for, other than a survey to document how many senile seniors there are in the community. The other people in the room (particularly two representing the local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association) shift about uncomfortably at the use of the word "senile," as it has negative connotations and refers to a wide range of cognitive functioning issues—and there is a long pause. When the coffee-seeking participants return, Rebecca repeats herself, and one Alzheimer's Association representative angrily challenges Rebecca on her use of the word "senile" as insulting and as an inappropriate label.

A heated discussion ensues about how the report research should be conducted so that it targets those with Alzheimer's, and not the wider range of dementia or senility-related diseases or situations of the senior population. Much controversy followed regarding how report information should be used, and the protection of confidential data from individuals in the community. The Alzheimer's Association representatives dominate discussion, and Rebecca has lost control of the meeting entirely as the group goes off on a tangent questioning why the report should be narrowly focused on seniors with Alzheimer's when senior care and support on a much broader basis is the issue municipal council should address.

At 5 p.m., nothing on the agenda has been achieved. Two people declare that their organizations will have nothing to do with such an ill-conceived project and walk out. The others quietly tell Rebecca they need more information about the parameters of the report and how their organizations should contribute to the study.

Because she did not arrange a recorder, no minutes were taken, so Rebecca summarizes the meeting in an e-mail a week later, saying that a discussion was held and that six organization representatives agreed to work on the project. One of the recipients of the e-mail responds that she did not agree to take part but rather indicated she wanted more information about the project and her organization's expected role.

Exhibit A

Meeting Agenda

ALZHEIMER'S IN THE COMMUNITY: A Report for The Corporation of the City of Moose Jaw

Round Table Discussion and Direction
September 22, 2021

AGENDA

1. Introductions
2. Mandate of report
3. What we need to find out about senile seniors
4. Who will do what
5. When the report is due
6. The final report
7. Adjournment and next meeting

Activities and Discussion

1. Overall, what went wrong with the planning, organization, communication, and facilitation of this meeting?

2. How could Rebecca have ensured the agenda, meeting, and follow-up were successful in moving the project to the next step? What would you do differently?
3. How could Rebecca have improved attendance? How could she have better engaged the participants and built their enthusiasm for the project?
4. Looking into the future, what do you think will happen with this project if the first meeting is any indicator of future success?