

Bigwigs in the Boardroom

By Melinda Ligos

Go ahead and love – or despise – these politicians. But partisan politics aside, their meeting styles are worth your attention.

We're not going to filibuster. (That's politics speak for beating around the bush).

We've recently had our finger on the pulse of the body politic, and one thing became readily apparent: Democrat candidates have to have at least some degree of meetings savvy. To be successful, they've got to have the skills to keep meetings short and on target. And in strategy sessions, they've got to be able to elicit thought-provoking responses. (The better to come up with those elaborate fund-raising schemes.)

With this in mind, we decided to put some political bigwigs to the test. We had three meetings experts dissect the meetings styles of five of the country's most noted politicians, including the biggest wig of them all, President Bill Clinton. The result? A mini meetings report card for each. Vote for 'em or vote against 'em, but don't discount the insights you'll get into the meeting styles of these major officeholders.

Gov. Christine Todd Whitman
(R-New Jersey)

Attitude Toward Meetings: "She feels they're a necessary part of the job," says Press Secretary Pete McDonough.

Prep Work: The governor is briefed for each meeting by one of her

three chiefs of staffs. She's a quick study, and can usually get up to speed in a matter of minutes. "She's got an extraordinary memory."

Meetings Style: Open and uninhibited. People are expected to say what's on their minds and are encouraged to let others speak without interruption. The Governor often walks around the room, using open gestures to encourage people to share their viewpoints. Joking and subtle teasing are welcomed.

Pet Peeve: When someone tries to sugarcoat a problem that's being discussed. "She expects participants to lay out the good, the bad, and the ugly, and if she feels someone's not being forthright, she'll start asking the hard questions. "The Governor doesn't want to go into an issue with one arm tied behind her back because someone was afraid to tell it like it is."

Wrap-up: Because of Governor Whitman's hectic schedule, meetings typically end because it's time for another one to begin. Whatever topics need further attention are placed on a future agenda.

Favorite Meeting Spot: In her office in the New Jersey statehouse in Trenton. The room, in the second-oldest statehouse in the country, looks out over a courtyard. "It has a very historic feel to it," with dark paneling, high ceilings, and a fireplace. The Governor sits at her

desk while others are seated in casual chairs around the room.

The Meetings She Likes Most:

The biweekly session with her three chiefs of staff. She usually serves lunch in her office. The agenda is very loose: The chiefs are invited to bring forth any issue they think needs her attention, and the atmosphere is warm and friendly.

Experts' Analysis: All of our experts agree on one thing about Gov. Whitman, or "Christie," as her constituents call her: By stating a clear purpose at the outset of a meeting, she goes a long way toward increasing productivity. "Stating a purpose is the anchor of any meeting," says Levasseur. "It helps focus the proceedings, and makes for effective time management." Whitman also got big kudos for her open style and her ground rule that no one is to be interrupted while speaking. "That helps ensure that participants get their complete thoughts heard, rather than bits and pieces," says Albert.

"It's likely that in a meeting with Whitman, people feel that they're going to get to say what they want without being attacked." Levasseur adds, "that establishes a high level of safety for people in the room."

Levasseur also liked the fact that Whitman prefers a comfortable environment for her meetings: Who wouldn't feel more relaxed and eager to participate on a cozy armchair beside a crackling fire? And Albert credits her for "getting out from behind her nonverbal barrier of a desk" from time to time, a tactic which probably energizes participants.

All of our experts had concerns, however, with the fact that Whitman's meetings often end because the Governor runs out of time. They

questioned whether this is because Whitman let participants ramble on for too long, and wondered if a hasty ending meant that participants were left without a clear understanding of what follow-up actions they were supposed to take.

"Meetings that end before the agenda is complete imply that participants spent too much time on each issue," says Kaye. He suggests that Whitman prepare an agenda with a schedule that budgets time for each issue. Albert goes further, recommending a two- or three-minute time limit for each speaker's comments on a given topic. "Bureaucrats are infamous for rambling on and on and failing to make a clear point," he says.

Levasseur suggests that Whitman always save time for a five-minute wrap-up, so she can recap what was decided on each item and figure out who's responsible for doing what before the next meeting. "Otherwise, things may fall through the cracks," he says. If Whitman thinks there might not be time for even a short wrap-up, another option is to tick off follow-up responsibilities immediately after each topic on the agenda.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich
(R-Georgia)

Attitude Toward Meetings: "He enjoys them because it gives him an opportunity to learn from staff and constituents," says Nancy Desmond, congressional chief of staff.

Jump Start: Likes to being by asking a thought-provoking question and giving all participants a chance to answer. "He does more listening than talking at the beginning."

Props: The Speaker is a former social studies teacher, so he likes to arrive with a flipchart and magic marker in tow. During complex discussions, he'll write on it – or invite a participant to come up and put his or her ideas to paper. Often, he'll arrange the seating in a U-shape, so participants will feel more comfortable speaking to one another.

Meetings Style: Provocative and intellectual. “Newt likes to get people thinking outside the box, so he'll ask questions to really make people think.” At one recent meeting in which educational issues were discussed, the Speaker asked, “If you were going to invent a learning system from scratch, what would it be?”

Because of the free-thinking atmosphere, Gingrich gives participants “a lot of leeway” in letting them speak their minds, and invites others to chime in when they feel they've got something important to say.

Pet Peeve: A meeting where nothing new is learned.

Favorite Meeting Spot: Atop a balcony in the U.S. Capitol Building on a sunny day. His second-favorite spot: His Atlanta office, with comfortable chairs and sofas aplenty.

Meeting He Likes Most: Quarterly sessions with Georgia's elected female officials. They set the agenda and keep the discussion going. “Newt's role is mainly to listen.”

Experts' Analysis: Who would have thought that the man who shut down the government over a budget impasse two years ago would be heralded as an excellent listener? All

three of our experts gave high praise to Gingrich's self-appointed role as a listener in meetings. “Too many leaders dominate a meeting and tend to jackhammer their own personal agendas, much to the dismay and disgust of participants,” says Albert.

Kaye agrees. “In politics, such an approach may be an excellent tool to let constituents feel connected with their government officials.” And he adds, Gingrich's openness to the ideas of others “encourages free thinking and creativity.”

The Georgia representative also scores bonus points for his practice of using flipcharts to record ideas. “Sketching ideas on paper helps participants to see relationships they might not otherwise perceive if a meeting consists only of seltzer bubbles of talk,” Albert says.

But the experts also see a few potential pitfalls with Gingrich's approach. Since he allows participants to pipe in at will, Levasseur wonders whether this means that participants aren't respectful of one another's ideas. “If someone interrupts at the expense of people not completing their thoughts, that's a big negative for the meeting,” says Levasseur. He recommends that Gingrich set a no-interruption ground rule, and do a little bit of policing to make sure people are respectful of each other's opinions, even if they disagree with them.

“Newt has established what you call a high-risk, high-reward environment,” he says. “You've got great ideas flowing, but if people beat up on other people's ideas, you're going to make people feel bad, and they'll become non-contributors.” Gingrich should coach participants to respond to ideas by

saying, “That’s a good idea, but here’s what I think,” Levasseur suggests.

All these experts urge Gingrich to take control at the end of the meeting to nail down any items that need to be acted upon. Otherwise, says Albert, people might “leave the meetings with warm fuzzies but little else.”

Sen. Dianne Feinstein
(D-California)

Attitude Toward Meetings: “She’s big on communication,” says spokesperson Jim Hock. “She sees her staff as a team so meetings are definitely important.” So important, in fact, that Feinstein attends an average of 10 per day and is one of the few senators to hold weekly staff meetings.

Prep Work: This California Senator is a bookworm: She reads everything she can get her hands on before discussing a new issue at a meeting.

Jump Start: Feinstein typically begins a meeting by handing out a one-page, typed agenda detailing all discussion topics. If participants aren’t prepared to discuss what’s on the agenda, “the meeting is very short,” says Hock, “and it won’t reconvene until everyone is up to speed.”

Meeting Style: Fast and highly focused. The senator ticks the items off the agenda one by one, inviting input that’s quick and to the point. She favors “yes” or “no” answers, and doesn’t let participants go off on tangents. If someone rambles, she’ll often interrupt them and rephrase a question, so they’ll be forced to respond with a shorter answer.

Wrap-Up: No one leaves without knowing exactly what actions they must take before the next meeting.

Favorite Meeting Spot: Her office’s conference room on the Capitol Hill, which her spokesperson describes as “warm and cozy,” with deep-blue carpeting, one large table, and comfortable couches lining the walls. Typically, weekly Monday morning staff meetings are held here, with the California staff participating via speakerphone. Feinstein welcomes the telephone participants with a hearty, “Hello California!” and quickly gets down to business.

Experts’ Analysis: The Senator received strong “nay” votes for her tendency to demand “yes” or “no” responses to questions. “By insisting on short answers, Feinstein may be missing out on the wonderful insights that can spring from the collective mind of meeting members as they build upon the ideas they exchange,” says Albert. “Her style may be leading some participants to think, ‘Why bother ... she’s a bubble on a hot griddle.’”

Levasseur agrees. “She’s totally suppressing people’s creativity,” he says, “and people must get stressed out when they have to commit to a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ without being able to explain their answer.”

Feinstein probably uses that technique to keep things focused and efficient – certainly an admirable goal – but the experts offer other ways to accomplish this. Levasseur suggests she have people give a show of hands for questions she wants to get a “yes” or “no” response to, and then give at least a few people a few moments to explain their vote. Or, he proposes allowing

everyone a very short amount of time – maybe one minute – to give a more extended response.

Albert says maybe if Feinstein were able to cut back the number of meetings she attended, she'd be able to give more attention to each one.

Not all aspects of Feinstein's fast and focused approach were criticized. She scored big for being thoroughly prepared before a session, and for having an agenda at the outset of a meeting (Kaye suggests she give it to participants before the meeting so they'll be even better prepared.)

President Bill Clinton (Democrat)

Attitude Toward Meeting: "They're essential for the exchange of ideas," says spokesperson Estela Mendoza.

Jump Start: For small meetings, the Chief Executive likes to deliver a detailed agenda before the meeting to lay out themes for discussion, so people can review it and be well-prepared. Sometimes, the agenda can be quite extensive, running upwards of 20 pages.

Meetings Style: Disciplined and interactive. The President expects everyone to stay on target. To keep staff focused, participants are encouraged to sit in the same seats each session, and food and other distractions are strongly discouraged. At the same time, the President makes it clear that he wants to explore all sides of each issue, so heated debates often erupt. During the debate portion of a meeting, some participants who get fired up might spring to their feet and walk around the room as they talk. The President is careful not to

interrupt speakers: He feels it's important to let them have their say.

Wrap-Up: Once the president is confident all views on an issue have been heard, the discussion will be tabled, and the nation's chief will reserve decisions until a later date. Often, he'll make a decision privately or with the help of a few close advisers.

Favorite Meeting Spot: The White House's Yellow Oval Room, which is both grand and cozy, with Louis XVI-style furniture, gilded armchairs, and yellow damask sofas. It is here where the President's weekly evening strategy sessions, with top advisers and Cabinet members, are held. These meetings, affectionately called "bull sessions," are high-spirited and interactive. But Clinton is very careful not to dominate the discussion, or let anyone else hog the spotlight, according to one staff member. "Everyone has an equal voice."

Expert's Analysis: Our nation's leader has oft been ridiculed for his tendency to bat around ideas incessantly before taking action. But this back-and-forth technique is actually a big plus, say our experts. "An effective facilitator always encourages healthy debate," says Albert.

And the fact that the Head of State often keeps his mouth shut when others are talking is also seen as valuable. "Of all the people who have the right to interrupt, it should be the President," says Levasseur. "But clearly, he understands that giving people a chance to speak their minds really makes them want to participate."

The experts also like the fact that Clinton considers all participants equals. "People usually think that when a leader

speaks, everyone has to be solemn and quiet,” Levasseur adds. “The President is saying to people that it’s okay to question his ideas.”

Albert suggests Clinton could go further by not giving participants assigned seats. Otherwise, people may feel there’s a pecking order depending on who gets to sit next to the Top Dog. “He should try to ‘stir up’ the meeting room with different seating arrangements from meeting to meeting,” he says. “Wow! What a salutary effect that would have.”

The experts also give thumbs up to the President’s practice of distributing an agenda beforehand. But all three debated his tendency to delay decisions until later. While Kaye said that letting important decisions rest “gives him a chance to analyze their impact” Levasseur and Albert wonder whether this is the best approach for every meeting.

Levasseur suggests the President at least “test for consensus” – by allowing the group to have a preliminary vote on an item – so he will have better information when he makes the decision in isolation.

He also recommends the President take a few minutes at the end to evaluate aspects of the meeting, such as how the group worked as a team. “There’s so much effort being put on the front end of the meeting,” he says. “Why not take some time to wrap-up the back end?”

Senator Bob Kerrey
(D-Nebraska)

Attitude Toward Meeting: “He is a big fan of meetings,” says press secretary Mike Marinello.

Prep Work: The Senator likes to see an agenda beforehand. He also likes to be briefed on the setting of the meeting, the format, who the participants are, and whether it is open to the press.

Jump Start: Senator Kerrey likes to welcome the meeting participants and make sure everyone is introduced before the meeting begins. He appoints a meetings facilitator - usually a Nebraskan who is knowledgeable and passionate about the subject matter – to lead the proceedings.

Meetings Style: Democratic. The senator prefers to be a partner rather than a leader in the discussion. When appropriate, he’ll ask challenging questions to keep the discussion lively.

Wrap-Up: The Senator recaps what’s been discussed, what problems have been solved, and suggests a course of action.

Favorite Meeting Spot: A conference room, preferably with a round table. Here, he’ll hold his favorite type of meetings” small, 30-minute-to-one-hour discussions where participants work toward a solution in a partner-like atmosphere.

Experts’ Analysis: Senator Kerrey got gold stars for his organizational skills. Our gurus liked the fact that he works by an agenda and spends time at the end of a session recapping points and setting forth action items.

They also gave him their votes for his democratic meetings style. Letting someone else do the facilitating – and using a round table – “tends to make everyone equal despite titles and job positions,” says Albert.

And Levasseur loved the fact that the Senator felt it important to introduce people to one another. “This makes people feel like it’s their meeting as much as his,” he says.

Using a facilitator also might have a positive political side effect, points out Kaye: “A facilitator can take care of unpopular tasks such as enforcing rules, order, and focus. That lets the Senator maintain his popularity with the participants, which earns votes for the next election.”

But both Albert and Kaye took pause at the fact that Senator Kerrey chooses a facilitator who is passionate

about the meeting’s subject matter. “The person’s biases will skew the proceedings,” warns Albert.

Kaye agrees. “A passionate facilitator can lead the group to conclusions that the facilitator supports, which may be different from what the group wants,” he says.

Both recommend using a non-biased leader. But if Kerrey insists on selecting a “passionate” facilitator, Albert suggests he also appoint a devil’s advocate, “who can ensure that the senator’s meetings offer a range of viewpoints and ward off the dangers of groupthink.”