

Effective Minutes' Management for Efficient Societal Communication

Martha Ada Onjewu

Abstract

Communication indicates and facilitates living. All humans have need to communicate all through life for the satisfaction of personal and societal goals. In societies, both large and small, people co-exist in formal as well as semi-formal institutions, associations or committees which meet regularly and engage Minutes as their basic communication tool. However, over time, it seems that Minutes rather than aiding the success of meetings cause setbacks because majority of them are managed by people whom, being non-professionals, are lacking in the skills of knowing the right things to do at the right time. Hence, this paper creates the awareness on the importance of effective Minutes' management in order to enhance both meeting success and effective over-all societal communication. This will be realized through a critical review of Minute's importance by touching on some of its basic aspects such as ways to prepare for taking its notes, the eventual composition of its final form from its draft and its distribution. These procedures demand the all-embracing roles of a Secretary. Such Secretaries should be selected or elected not on the grounds of sentiments or politics but on their having the necessary capacity the position requires. There should be cooperation from all the relevant people Secretaries need to work with to ensure that Minutes go through the necessary procedures of logical composition before distribution to every member, present or absent at the last meeting. Distributions of the final form of the Minutes is preferably done as soon as possible after the meeting.

Keywords: Minutes, communication, efficient, society, procedure, distribution

Introduction

People in society communicate mandatorily for the achievement of self and group goals because communication facilitates living and indicates being alive whether it is verbal or otherwise like being written or expressed in gestures. Written communication is prevalent for informal, semi-formal and formal purposes. Minutes, known as record of the proceedings of a meeting, has become a very veritable means of communication at formal and semi-formal gatherings involving people who are committed to the actualization of goals. Minutes of meetings (MoMs) facilitate the achievement of the essence of

gatherings by keeping every member abreast of discussions at their meetings with resolutions reached, actions taken and the people responsible for the actions. Invariably, it serves as the backbone of the communication at meetings because it a permanent record (Oliver, 2020) and without it, meetings may not function well in the future.

Society itself is too large and complex these days to come together as one, so, people in society coexist in institutions, committees or associations at various categories and meet from time to time in order to look into the achievement of their goals for which MoM is engaged. When MoM is well managed, it is capable of helping people actualize their goals for progress, the overall success of societal living and people are happy because of good flow of communication; whereas inefficient handling of MoM leads to dissatisfaction, waste of time, confusion, misunderstanding, indifference, low progress and overall poor societal communication.

Meanwhile, it obviously appears that majority of people in society are still oblivious of how powerful MoMs could be when properly compiled, distributed in order to appropriately utilize for common good because in a majority of cases. What currently obtains are MoMs that have not been properly arranged, are too wordy and yet lacking in the very essence for which they have been written, that is, not adequately capturing deliberations, decisions reached and people to carry out the decisions coupled with very poor circulation strategy which are turn offs to some people and could be the reason for poor attendance at meetings as well as poor achievement of meetings.

Incidentally, although, there are professionals with the skill of Minutes of meeting writing, majority of them are handled by in experts. Professionals are mostly involved with formal meetings in their places of work, while majority of the meetings of people in society are semi-formal and their Minutes are mostly managed by people without professional knowledge of it. Hence, the purpose here is to shade some light on basic proper preparation, writing and handling of MoMs for improved general societal communication and progress within the following parameters:

- Importance of Minutes to Societal Communication
- Some Basic Components of Minutes
- Writing and Distribution of Minutes
- Common Flaws of Minutes Writing
- A Secretary's roles at Meetings
- Conclusion
- Recommendations

Importance of Minutes to societal communication

Minutes has been variously defined but the one by Heathfield (2019, para.1) which refers to it as “written or recorded documentation that is used to inform attendees and non-attendees about what was discussed or what happened during a meeting” captures the essence of this discussion. As rightly stated in the given definition, a MoM is always meant to serve the purpose of meeting members, present or absent. It binds ALL members to the resolutions and decisions of the meeting, so long as a quorum was formed before the commencement of the meeting. So, a MoM compiler (Secretary) is expected to bear such an understanding in mind to carry everyone along. The gain of which is contained in a discussion by Cantarelli (2017), in which the following definite importance of MoMs could be deduced:

- Enabling participants present at both the last and current meeting remember what was discussed.
- Informing absent participants at the last meeting about its entire communication.
- Naming the participants mandated to carry out specific tasks at the last meeting with timelines.
- Confirming the decision already taken when there is misunderstanding or conflict.
- Facilitating a current meeting.

In addition, the following additional importance to Minutes can ascribed:

- Serving as a requirement for Banking and Corporate organizations' administration purposes.
- Serving as evidence in lawsuits.
- Embodying the historical facts of an institution or association.

Some basic components of Minutes

Minutes vary in style, volume and composition. It contains the name of a meeting, names of attendees or present members, absent members as well as members with apologies along with all that was discussed and resolutions or decisions taken alongside how and why they were taken. All must be presented logically according to the order of proceedings of a meeting (Muharon, n.d.). Decisions taken are indicated in sentences beginning with expressions such as: 'The house or committee agreed or recommended that . . .' and it implicates ALL members. Such MoMs become binding on ALL members at the next meeting of a body after its adoption and signing by a Chairman (Onjewu, 2020). Nevertheless, Minutes embodies some common components that are often confused, both during meetings and in MoMs. Hence the need here to clarify on the following:

- **Matters arising from the last Minute:** Matters arising from the last Minutes are the matters that were either just mentioned or partly deliberated upon but yet to be concluded and hence need to be further deliberated upon or given an update on in an ongoing meeting; they are matters that are still continuing. Such matters are always in the Minutes of the last meeting which is being discussed at a current meeting. To conclude the matters, further deliberations are held leading to a resolution in word and action implementation. However, one often observes the title of this component simply written as "Matters arising" which is an incomplete expression that should be avoided. Instead, writing the title "Matters Arising from the Last Minutes" in full is more desirable, appropriate and professional.
- **New matters:** New matters are those that have never been discussed at a past meeting and have not become a part of the Minutes of the last meetings, but are developments that have evolved after the last general meeting. They could engender either from associate bodies or from the members of an executive committee which may have deliberated upon them at their executive committee level for further deliberation by an entire body. The intention of the further deliberation is to resolve them, and if already resolved by an executive committee, then their resolution is conveyed to the meeting for the sake of knowledge sharing and equally to become a part of the MoM records.
- **Any other business:** Some of the matters relevant to the well-being or concerns of meeting members might not only emanate from its executive committee, but also from floor members. During meetings, such matters are called up during the session for 'Any other Business' or 'General' as it is popularly called. The issues that so emanate could either be deliberated upon, if seconded and resolved or are carried over to subsequent meetings as matters arising from the Minutes until they are resolved.

Writing and distribution of draft Minutes

The major handling of MoMs is undertaken by a Secretary who begins by taking the notes (making jottings from an ongoing meeting deliberation for later compilation of Minutes) from which he/she composes the Minutes. After its composition, he/she presents it to a Chairman for approval within twenty-four hours of concluding the meeting. Thereafter, the Secretary ensures its circulation to all members within seven (7) days of the meeting in order to minimize the tendency to forgetfulness by the people (Agamah & Adaji, 2006). Early distribution of Minutes carries all meeting members along, keeps them abreast and it facilitates a fruitful deliberation at the next meeting. The composed Minutes is called draft Minutes until adopted at the next meeting through a motion proposed by a member and seconded by another member. According to Heller and Hindle (1998), compiling Minutes is meaningless until

all actions agreed on are carried out. It means Minutes are not about a verbatim report but about identifying the most important points and keeping them short, concise and precise (Blome, 2019).

Common flaws of Minutes writing

As earlier noted, many MoMs are handled by non-professionals who rely on their instincts and common sense in their administration. This often results in Minutes that are not well captured because they are ill organized, written in the wrong tenses and poorly distributed. Some observed common flaws are hereby discussed as follows:

Incomplete headings: a Minutes is a formal document in all rights. As such, care is needed in its compilation in order that it is as unambiguous as possible. Its headings and subheadings should be well defined and carefully worded. For instance, many minutes' titles are incomplete both in contents like simply being written as 'Meeting of . . .' and not even 'Minutes of the Meeting of . . .' in addition to not stating its serial number, venue and time, e.g. 'Minutes of the 7th Meeting of Kaduna Friendship Forum held at City Multipurpose Hall on Saturday February 8, 2020 at 5: 00 PM'. Also, writing just 'Matters Arising' rather than 'Matters Arising from the Last Minutes' could have grievous consequences that generate contestable problems in a law suit.

Incomplete contents: firstly, many minutes do not mention the name of the person who presided or the Chairman at the meeting. These information are essential because, although, particular people are meant to preside at particular meetings, if for some reasons, they are unable to do so, others are appointed to take their place in an acting capacity. Ethically, it is professional to indicate very early in a Minutes like in its section on 'Opening Remarks' to say for instance, 'The President, Mr. Adamu Abu, who presided at the meeting welcomed members . . . or in the absence of the President, Mr. James Dodo presided and welcomed all members present'.

Secondly, many minutes contain a list of present members and members with apologies for not attending but without a list of absent members under attendance. This is a gross mistake for one of the key components of Minutes is attendance. The inclusion of attendance is occasioned by one of the articles of the standing orders or constitution of bodies that stipulates the attendance requirement of members which only a strict record of attendance can help to implement. When the implementation of attendance record keeping is poor, meeting attendance is equally poor since nothing gets to happen to members who fail to attend meetings regularly or over a period of time. It is necessary to take adequate note of members' attendance, because of those regularly absent at times disagree or disregard the resolutions that have been arrived at in their

absence. This creates confusion, which if not resolved amicably, results in bad blood or stalemate among meeting members.

Also, the date of next meeting is often omitted from Minutes, which should not be. It is always better for members to have such a date in mind, while rising from a current meeting for a good attendance at the next meeting.

Other than the foregoing, aspects like Adjournments are often not conclusively recorded in Minutes. For instance, writing 'Mr. Samuel John moved the motion for the adjournment of the meeting and was seconded by Mr. Bala Akawu' does not imply that that motion was carried until thus stated. Therefore, it is better written as 'The meeting was brought to a close following a motion for adjournment proposed by Mr. Samuel John and seconded by Mr. Bala Akawu'. This same kind of incompleteness also often affects the recording of the adoption of Minutes. After the mention of the proposer and seconder of the motion for its adoption, it is often not stated whether the motion was taken or not as the information is often not provided. For instance, many minutes typically only state that 'The motion for the adoption of the Minutes of the last meeting was moved by Mr. Samuel John and seconded by Mr. James Abu', but it does not state the actual adoption of the Minutes. Instead stating that 'The minutes of last meeting was adopted by the house following a motion moved by Mr. Abel John and seconded by Mr. James Abu' is better.

Inappropriate tense: A Minutes of meeting covers discussions that have already held, so, it is predominantly written in the simple past tense; otherwise, most parts of Minutes would be inaccurate during a current meeting. For instance, writing 'Mr. Pius John is sick and hospitalized. He is to be visited on behalf of our association by ...' while the said Mr. Pius John has recovered and in attendance at a current meeting is inappropriate. The use of 'was' is more appropriate in the same way as using 'would' is better than 'will'. Also, the use of the passive voice is preferable in expressions such as 'It was agreed . . .' (Blome, 2019).

Poor arrangement: Every meeting is ideally a process which begins from a definite activity and ends in another definite activity. In between this arrangement are several other activities which follow serially as agreed by each body or organization or institution. However, there are common contents that run through all Minutes including: Commencement or Opening, Opening Remarks, Reading and Adoption of the Last Minutes, Matters Arising from the Last Minutes, etc.

Poor itemization. One of the purposes of Minutes is to serve as the basis for discussion at meetings, hence, proper itemization of all its contents is of the

essence in facilitating an easy navigation of Minutes during meetings without a waste of time. Both Arabic numerals (1,2,3) and letters of the alphabet (A, B, C) are ideal and could be appropriately engaged in all items of Minutes for easy referencing during meetings. For instance,

- 1.0 Attendance
 - 1.1. Present
 - a. -----
 - b. -----
 - 1.2. Apologies
 - a. -----
 - b. -----
 - 1.3. Absent
 - a. -----
 - b. -----
- 2.0. Commencement, etc.

Poor attitude of MoM writers: Many Secretaries are not open to learning on the job. Oftentimes, they make mistakes from the onset of their tenures. These mistakes persist all through their tenure even when the mistakes would have been pointed out continuously overtime to them. Such a situation, when allowed, to continue translates to time waste and egotism that may lead to a consequent poor attendance of members. The consequent implications of such negligence must be nipped in the bud. Chairmen of meetings could assist Secretaries to engage the ideal process of managing Minutes. They must insist that Minutes are submitted to them within 24 hours of the end of the Minutes, for their evaluation and synthetization before the circulation of the Minutes to eradicate traces of excesses of Secretaries in their taken and drafted Minutes.

Verbatim reporting: A Minutes is ideally not supposed to be a verbatim report of meeting deliberations (Agamah & Adaji, 2006; Onjewu, 2020) but an all-inclusive summary. What needs to be reported under the Matters Arising from the Minutes, for instance, is the name of the proposer and seconder of a motion (as evidence that it qualified for deliberation) and its resolution with perhaps how it was reached (through a debate or vote).

Wrong expressions: By its nature, there are approved terminologies for Minutes' writing that are similarly engaged at meetings. Although many people may know the terminologies, they often do not know their correct expressions. For instance, saying:

'Mr. James John moved the Minutes' (Wrong)

'Mr. James John moved the motion for the adoption of the

Minutes' (Correct)

'Mr. Daniel Abu adjourned the meeting' (Wrong)

'Mr. Daniel Abu moved the motion for the adjournment of the meeting' (Correct)

Secretary's roles at meetings

Secretaries are indispensable to meetings considering their roles in MoMs administration. Without good MoMs, Society would fail to profit from the efforts made to meet and also fail to succeed. A Secretary, like the heart of a body, works round the clock to convene a meeting, source out venues for hosting of meeting, writes and facilitates the circulation of Minutes, follows up the implementation of decisions and lots more. For clarity sake, a Secretary's roles are broken down as follows:

Before a meeting: a Secretary is involved in several activities like liaising with a Chairman to prepare an agenda, sending a notice of meeting, getting the meeting venue ready, and arranging for relevant documents and organizing for entertainment at an upcoming meeting. He/she also prepares a template for taking notes during meetings. It helps him/her to cope with the pace of discussion and not missing out on any essential piece of the discussion with ease. Above all, a Secretary ensures they know the details of all items on the agenda by reading up previous Minutes and making enquiries from relevant quarters in order to facilitate a meeting's note taking, as well as to help remind or offer a clarification at the next meeting if required.

During a meeting: a Secretary brings along the Minutes of the last meeting which is to be deliberated upon with other relevant documents and ensures their equitable distribution aside also bringing along relevant equipment. Also, a Secretary takes the attendance at the meeting, reads the Minutes, reads any available report as well as reads any correspondences received and closely relates with the Chairman to facilitate meeting deliberation. He ensures compliance with the agenda while offering all relevant information and takes down notes for drafting of the Minutes thereafter.

After a meeting: a Secretary develops a draft of the Minutes of a meeting by strictly following an approved template from the notes taken during the meeting and takes it to the Chairman to correct for omission, expression and arrangement of details or for approval within twenty four hours. He/she then signs the Minutes and ensures its distribution to all members within a week of holding the meeting.

Furthermore, a Secretary ensures the storage of all adopted Minutes, correspondences, reports and all documents of an association with dates, tags and numbers for easy tracing and identification.

Conclusion

These days, the writing and indeed the entire management of meeting Minutes leave very much to be desired. Since such a situation does not enhance good information sharing for progress in institutions and association which translate to the larger society. There is therefore urgent need for improvement in the entire management of Minutes to enhance the effective communication that they are meant to be achieved in order to boast societal communication for common good.

Recommendations

In order for Minutes of meetings to aid effective communication for functional and progressive societies, here are some recommendations:

- * To avoid having Minutes that are devoid of very relevant and basic information, institutions, associations or other groups should develop a template for their Minutes.
- * The choice or selection or election of a Secretary by any institution or body should be devoid of sentiments and politics but based on the individual possessing the necessary exposure and capacity for the job. A Secretary should be a person who is knowledgeable in English language, responsible, proactive, hardworking and smart, among other attributes.
- * Secretaries should write the Minutes of a concluded meeting immediately afterwards and present same to whoever presided at the meeting for their input within twenty-four hours and as soon as possible thereafter to all meeting members. These days, distribution of Minutes could be done using social media but with appropriate security checks in place to prevent the intrusion of non-members.
- * Minutes should be written in the simple past tense since it is a record of a deliberation held in the past.
- * Secretaries should engage short simple sentences expressed in the passive voice as much as possible for clarity and anonymity of expression.
- * Minutes should be well arranged and appropriately numbered for easy referencing during meetings or whenever the need arises.
- * Bodies that are privileged to have members with professional skills in Minutes Writing should appoint them Secretaries to enable them bring their wealth of experience to bear in the administration of their MoMs for success and over all societal growth.
- * Whereby such professionals are too engaged with other commitments to fully avail themselves as Secretaries, let them be pleaded with to mentor appointed Secretaries.
- * Secretaries should ensure the circulation of Minutes as soon as possible after a meeting and if the meeting spans over one-week, recirculating

Minutes within another week to the next meeting to further prepare members for a fruitful deliberation is not a bad idea.

- * Secretaries should send reminders to members with assignments to carry out half way to the next meeting.
- * Secretaries should ensure sending a notice of meeting with further frequent reminders as much as possible. Social media could also facilitate such reminders.
- * Secretaries should ensure the provision of any document that needs to be discussed at a meeting for an enhanced participation of members.
- * All Minutes of institutions and bodies should be numbered by the Secretaries who compile them to assist all concerned keep a good record of all meetings held.
- * Secretaries who are the managers of meetings need to be appreciated and cooperated with by all meeting members for all round success. A situation whereby they are only castigated for wrong doing is detrimental to their proficiency
- * Chairmen and Secretaries should ensure that a meeting's discussions follow in the order of the agenda to facilitate a smooth and logical running of meetings as well as ease note taking by Secretaries.
- * Where possible, secretaries should send all documents for discussion at an upcoming meeting ahead of time to members to enable them peruse their contents adequately enough for fruitful discussions during the meeting.
- * For the comfort of meeting attendees and to facilitate fruitful discussions, Secretaries should select meeting venues that have enough space, seats that are comfortable, decent conveniences and a good ventilation.
- * Secretaries should ensure that Minutes are written in a style and manner devoid of ambiguities and brief so that the members, both present and absent can read and understand them clearly.
- * Secretaries should at all times avoid a verbatim reporting of meeting discussions in the Minutes. Seeking all clarification to understand meeting discussion is helpful to achieve this ability.
- * Secretaries should ensure that meeting venues, time and agenda are properly communicated to all members and in good time to enable members who are unable to attend but have a contribution to send in for a robust and rich deliberation.
- * Secretaries should ensure the availability of adequate refreshments commensurate with the duration of a meeting.

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