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The Katrina coffee klatch

IT'S the unsung quality in political leadership, a pedestrian skill rarely mentioned by pundits or political scientists.

But it's absolutely essential in a crisis.

It is the ability to run a meeting, and Houston Mayor Bill White has it.

For a week now, White and County Judge Robert Eckels have presided over a daily "Katrina Working Group" session in Room 306 of the George R. Brown Convention Center. It's the forum in which a wide variety of people dealing with scores of thousands of evacuees raise issues and agree on actions.

White's people are eager to talk about how much leadership Eckels has provided. The fact is, the two top elected officials have worked very well together, with a rare ability to defuse turf issues.

The 8 a.m. meeting I attended Tuesday was presided over by White. There was one ground rule. I was to report "color and flavor but not detail."

The reason: Candor must be encouraged and grandstanding discouraged. That's hard enough for bureaucrats and politicians without having them worrying about what they'll read about themselves.

A surprise at the table

White kicked off the meeting by saying, "The most controversial discussions are the ones we should raise around this (table) because this is where we have the most brains gathered."

White also gently reminded one speaker that this meeting was not for speeches. I'm told in early meetings he was not so gentle as some elected officials felt the need to orate.

It's a large room, with long tables arranged in a square with enough room to seat about 40, with microphones for all. Dozens of others sit in rows of chairs away from the table.

The first rule of running a good meeting is to invite the right people.

Around the table are elected officials and key city and county staff, as well as executives from KBR, CenterPoint Energy and the Wedge Group, church leaders, American Red Cross and FEMA executives, and heads of the Houston Food Bank and the United Way.

One group represented at the table is something of a surprise: The Metropolitan Organization.

Organizing evacuees

TMO is part of a network of community organizations that works under principles originally developed by the late activist Saul Alinsky. It and its sister groups across the state are known for their willingness to forcefully confront public officials on issues affecting low-income citizens.

Eckels and White had the good sense to agree to put to use the group's skill at listening to traditionally disenfranchised people. Beginning Saturday, they allowed TMO organizers and leaders into the Astrodome.

"We figured there were a lot

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of people in the Astrodome who had been leaders in New Orleans," said Renee Barrios, TMO's lead organizer. "We decided to organize them. We announced over the loudspeakers that all church and neighborhood leaders should come to a particular section up in the stands."

About 50 came up, she said, to talk about the problems and issues the residents were facing. The number has grown to about 100 in the days since, and those go out and talk to other residents about their concerns.

So Barrios sits at the table to voice the concerns of the evacuees. The notion that their concerns should be heard is both obvious and rarely executed.

When White called on Barrios to report Tuesday, the first issue was concern among evacuees that their cell phones were being cut off, either because they had not paid their bills or because a cell-phone company was shutting down the New Orleans area code. Many need the phones to hunt for family members.

White asked for thoughts, and when nobody quickly spoke he directed staff to put together a letter signed by the entire congressional delegation addressed to the CEOs of major cell-phone companies. He also

said he would arrange for the senators and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay to contact the head of the Federal Communications Commission to address the issue.

Barrios raised another issue that had been addressed Sunday. An important task would be accomplished with volunteers if possible but by paid vendors if necessary. When White asked the person in charge for a report, he said they had given up on volunteers and were making arrangements to contact vendors.

White sternly let him know that this should have been done Sunday afternoon and would be done by noon Tuesday. And this man did not work for White.

But then the mayor softened: "Look, when people drop the ball, let's address it here," he said. "It's not blame. We are all overwhelmed."

That's the way the 90-minute meeting went as participants raised several other issues and formulated response plans that included not only what would be done but who would do it.

Today they'll do it again.

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