It's one thing to sit through meetings; it's another to really listen, engage in discussion and learn new things. Use these tips to reap the benefits of attending any MSAE event or conference.

Seminars and conferences are great opportunities for learning. They offer information that is timely - and make you evaluate information in terms of how it applies to you. Here are some guidelines to maximize the benefits of attendance:

**The objective is to learn.** Don’t focus on what you already know. Specifically look for one or two good ideas from every presenter. At the end of the day you may have a dozen new facts, resources and inspirations.

Lower your sensitivity meter. You’re attending to get information, not to be offended by a remark or word. Don’t expect everything to be politically correct. Don’t criticize the presenter; instead help them make a dynamic presentation by listening and nodding your head when you agree or by asking good questions.

Determine what you think you will learn before the meeting. Prepare by reading speaker bios, picking the right sessions for you, and anticipating some of the content and what you want to learn from the presenter. If you don’t hear the information during the session, stay a minute or two afterwards and ask the speaker if you can talk or exchange e-mails later on.

Listen with the intent to really understand. Sometimes you have to hear the entire presentation before you understand the original concepts. Don’t cut off the thought or start criticizing too soon. Listen with the intent to learn and improve yourself. The best way to do this is to take good notes and be quiet.

Ask good questions. Either silently to yourself or write them down as they occur to you and ask them at the appropriate moment. Question to learn, not to show-off in front of colleagues.

Realize that all information won’t apply all the time. Pick out what will work for you and concentrate on applying the new information.

Turn off distractions. Put away your calendar, phone, newspaper and trade journals so you can really focus on the presentation. (Unless of course, you are Tweeting)

Take good notes. Often great ideas are lost before they have a chance to be implemented because you can’t read your notes, you don’t read them when you return, or you didn’t take any notes. Write notes as if they will be read at your next staff meeting. Share the “idea-gems” you learn with at least one other person.

Sit next to someone you don’t know. Stay apart from the people with whom you came. Make new friends. Look for a potential mentor, customer or contact. At the breaks make a point of meeting at least one new person.

Focus yourself. Don’t worry about everyone else, just concentrate on becoming the best you can be for yourself.

Find the best seat. Try to avoid distractions by sitting near the front; arrive early so you can find the seat you’re comfortable in. If the handouts are on the table when you arrive early, scan them for content so you’ll be able to better follow the presentation.

Be open to new seeds of wisdom. With an open mind you may hear something that can change your approach to a project or motivate you to expand your interests.

Learn in the hallways and tradeshow aisles. Not all learning is taught at the podium. Keep your notebook in hand and ask questions of the people you meet outside the meeting room. If exhibitors are present, the information they provide and their handouts might give you new ideas and facts.

Contact the meeting sponsors; they have a purpose for participating in the conference. Recognize the sponsors, thank them, and find out what is new with them and what they might be able to help you with.

By Bob Harris, CAE, is chairman of nonprofitcenter.com. He can be reached at bob@rchcae.com or 850-570-6000.

www.msaecom