

A NEW WAY TO MEET

How to fix common meeting pitfalls to make your team more productive. By Kimberly Douglas

It's Friday afternoon, and your team is filing into the conference room, mumbling and grumbling as they take their seats for yet another meeting. An hour passes and the meeting comes to a much-anticipated end, leaving everyone involved wondering why the meeting was held in the first place.

In these tough economic times, every second of the work day is valuable. None of it should be wasted in meetings that seem to go nowhere or that are plagued by conflict or lack of participation.

If leaders know how to conduct better meetings, those meetings can actually become time well-spent – time that increases employee productivity, participation and innovation.

Meetings have become a way for leaders and their employees to simply go through the motions. Having a meeting, in and of itself, is not a bad idea. In fact, meetings can be the most engaging and thought-provoking times of the day for team members.

The key is avoiding those pitfalls that sink a meeting's productivity.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

A common problem with many meetings is that they're scheduled with seemingly no clear objective in mind. Run through a pre-meeting checklist before putting it on everyone's schedule. First, ask yourself whether the meeting is even necessary. Could the information you want to provide be just as easily presented in an e-mail? What do you want to accomplish with the meeting? Will reaching that accomplishment really require a group decision? If you ask yourself these questions and decide that you do need to have the meeting, next consider who should attend. Design an agenda for the meeting, and clearly communicate any prep work that needs to be done by the participants beforehand.

WHERE'S THE AGENDA?

Remember the last time you actually received an agenda in advance of a meeting?

Likely, you immediately had a higher perception of whether that meeting was going to be a waste of time or not. Once you know who will be attending the meeting, you need to finalize the agenda. A quality meeting agenda includes:

- The date, time and location of the meeting;
- The meeting's objectives;
- Three to six agenda items, accompanied by how long they'll take to discuss and who the discussion leaders will be; and
- A clear explanation of the prep work that should be completed before the meeting.

It is OK to use standing agenda items from meeting to meeting – such as company overview, industry trends, strategy discussion, review of metrics, results and problem solving – as long as you also include the length of time allotted for each item and who will be leading the discussion.

Send the agenda out as far in advance of the meeting as possible, and then re-distribute an agenda/meeting reminder 48 hours prior to the meeting.

CONFERENCE ROOM OVERCROWDING.

Would you attend a meeting if you didn't know why the meeting was being held and why you, in particular, were invited? Often, too many people who don't have a clear understanding of what role they are supposed to play are invited to meetings. Those in attendance need to know if you want them to be an expert, an influencer or a decider.

Keep the number of "required" attendees as small as possible. And if critical members can't attend, consider postponing the meeting until they can. Having a meeting without all of the right brains present can cause just as many delays and productivity problems as postponing the meeting a couple of days.

Finally, use the following litmus test. Ask yourself: Will this meeting be the best use of this person's time, given our objectives? If you answer yes, then it's highly likely that person should be there.

Or, use a meeting cost calculator, which allows employees to privately enter in their salaries and the meeting length to calculate how much it is costing the company for them

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to be in a given meeting. It is a powerful tool that can promote individual productivity because it reminds everyone involved of the financial significance of the time spent in the meeting.

THE MEETING LASTS FOREVER.

Now, that might be an exaggeration, but that exact thought will be crossing the minds of those attending a meeting that seems to be going nowhere. When the eyes of attendees start wandering to watches in an attempt to see exactly how much time they've spent in the meeting and to estimate how much more time will elapse before they can get back to their long to-do lists, you're in trouble.

Providing a meeting agenda will go a long way toward solving this problem. When attendees know exactly when a meeting will be over, they won't spend their time internally speculating about when they can leave.

Create a reputation for yourself as being a meeting leader who starts and ends on time, every time. And if you do need to extend the meeting's length, ask the group's permission before doing so. The ideal maximum meeting length is 60 minutes.

Use time boxes for each agenda item. That means a certain amount of time is allotted for each agenda item. Bring a kitchen timer that you can use to enforce the time limits.

THE MEETING IS A FREE-FOR-ALL.

Anyone who's ever attended a meeting or led a meeting knows that it doesn't take long for things to get off track. The best way to avoid losing control of the conversation and the meeting as a whole is to set some conversational ground rules – everyone participates, or don't ramble – right away.

Make it clear to those in attendance that the ground rules will be used to ensure that everyone's time is well-spent.

BIG TALKERS EAT UP ALL THE TIME.

Every meeting has them: those people who love to let everyone know they are the most important people in the room, have the best ideas and have a comment to make on every subject. Your conversational ground rules should help keep your big talkers in line, but there are other ways to ensure that one person doesn't dominate.

First, don't let big talkers sit at the front of the room or the back center of a U-shape. This definitely gives them a feeling of being on stage. In fact, you may even want to use assigned seating for the meeting.

CONFLICT KILLS PRODUCTIVITY.

Keep in mind is that effective meetings aren't necessarily free of conflict. In fact, conflict can be a good thing, and it should be valued by those attending any given meeting. The key is not letting it get out of hand.

Try viewing conflict as "creative abrasion," a phrase coined by the president of Nissan Design International, Jerry Hirshberg. Here's a metaphorical explanation of how it works: Picture two tectonic plates on the Earth's surface – your way and my way, perhaps – grating against each other. Many people

know that when this kind of friction occurs between plates, earthquakes often ensue. But what happens when these two plates – or viewpoints – come together? If the environment is right, they create a mountain – a third viewpoint that is a product of the first two approaches and that is grander, loftier, and more powerful than either one was on its own. In other words, conflict is turned into synergy.

If – or when – things do get heated, ask everyone to take a break for a couple of minutes to think things over. Reinforce the ground rules and ask team members to listen to each other and consider what a possible compromise might be. Remind everyone of the meeting's ultimate goal and ask, given that goal, how you all can move forward to achieve it. You might hear from your team that more information needs to be gathered. That would make for a good reason to stop the meeting right then and set a date for a future meeting.

If the knowledge is in the room, it's likely people just aren't listening to each other.

WHO'S MAKING THE DECISIONS?

So your meeting is nearly over, you've discussed everything on the agenda and you're ready to send everyone on their ways. Unfortunately, no one is quite clear about what they're supposed to be doing. As the leader, you don't have to be the one making all of the decisions, but you do have to make sure the decision-making process is clear to everyone.

Make sure everyone understands who will

be making the final decision from the get-go. The quickest way for a leader to lose his team's respect is for him to make a decision that his team thought they would be making. If you just want your team's input and will be making the final decision on your own, let them know that ahead of time. They will be happy to weigh in and will feel good that you respect and want their opinions.

NO DECISIONS ARE CAPTURED.

Too often, meetings end and everyone simply goes back to business as usual without putting

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anything that was discussed in the meeting into action, or without even knowing what they personally should do.

If you keep the format for capturing what went on in the meeting simple, you have a much greater likelihood of getting it done and getting it distributed quickly. There is no simpler way to record what went on than by writing on a flip chart the who, what and by when outcomes of the directives discussed in the meeting.

EVALUATIONS ARE NOT DONE.

For many organizations, meetings have simply become something that employees feel like they have to get through.

They think that all they need to do is sit through the meeting, and then they can get back to the task at hand. A great way to ensure that this isn't the mindset of those in your organization's meetings is to do proper meeting evaluations.

Have everyone assess the four Ps:

- Progress. Are we achieving the goals we set out?
- Pace. Are we moving too fast or too slowly to achieve those goals?
- Process. Are we using the right tools/methods?
- Pulse. How is everyone feeling – frustrated, satisfied, energized?

By implementing a few key tools, you can breathe life back into your meetings. **GCI**

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