

Making Meetings Work: Simple Guidelines for Solid Gains

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Walk into an office or break room and ask your coworkers if they want to attend another meeting today. Poll the leaders in your organization for the number one thing they would reduce or eliminate from their weekly schedules. Meetings will make the top three (if not the first spot) every time. Better yet, look in a mirror and watch the visual change in your own countenance as you imagine life with fewer meetings.

The subject of meetings drops the emotional barometer of people in all kinds of workplaces. People say things like, “If I never had to attend another staff meeting, it would be too soon” (from a staff pastor) or “Our meetings are hellacious” (from a missionary). Articles and books on the subject carry titles such as *I Hate Meetings*, *Death by Meeting*, and “Escape from Meeting Hell.” Clearly, meetings do not rank among people’s favorite things!

Do you want to hear the good news or bad news? First the bad: in this life at least, meetings you will have with you always. But do not overlook the good news: meetings *can* be improved. This essential organizational function can be retooled to provide the connectivity, synergy and effective decision-making necessary to accelerate momentum.

The most common causes for unsuccessful meetings are lack of notification, lack of preparation, no agenda or hidden agendas, the wrong people in attendance, lack of control or influence in meetings and

political pressure.¹ Leaders who pay attention to cost, context, communication, content, conflict and creativity will see significant improvement in the meetings themselves and in the morale of the people in those meetings.

Count the Cost

What would happen if your company instituted a one-year ban on meetings? Despite the incredible appeal and the predictable cheers, authors Whitney and Giovagnoli suggest that the assumption that business could be conducted without meetings ought to be challenged.²

“Meetings are the focal point for interaction in an organization. Meetings bring together people from different parts of the organization to communicate, allocate work, resolve disputes, and make decisions.”³ Purposeful meetings have value.

Purpose is the defining factor. Stephen Baker’s tongue-in-cheek guide *I Hate Meetings* lists the following purposes for meetings: saying hello to colleagues you haven’t seen since yesterday, telling jokes, making speeches, looking important, posing as a leader, complaining, displaying expertise on subjects you know nothing about and delegating responsibilities.⁴ Moving away from these realities requires a leader who knows what he or she wants from the meeting before calling it. This knowledge in no way implies specific

answers, decisions or direction. Rather, the leader must be able to ask the question that will lead to the answer or at least to the next question on the path to that answer. Discovering the answer justifies the cost.

Meetings cost an enormous amount of money. When one considers that more than 25 million are held in the United States each day,⁵ the sum total of the participants' salaries boggles the mind. Holding meetings out of habit or calendar obligation ought to be punishable by a fine equivalent to the cost of the meeting. Even better, see the value of the meeting and ensure its worth before scheduling.

Craft the Context

In his book *Death by Meeting*, Patrick Lencioni identifies “meeting stew” as the single greatest structural problem.⁶ In an attempt to save time, leaders tend to dump every issue into one big staff meeting that accomplishes little except wasting time. Lencioni contends that more meetings, not less, are the answer, and context—the right issue in the right kind of meeting—is critical.

The work begins by differentiating between kinds of issues. Social (“Welcome back from your trip.”), logistical (“I’m out of the office on Friday.”), tactical (“How are we going to respond to the boss’ request?”), strategic (“What should our new program look like?”), and evaluative (“How can this team be more effective?”) items comprise the most common types. Each has different time requirements and levels of importance.

Tactical and strategic items present the greatest difficulty of separation. Often, tactical decisions prompt strategic discussions. Without the time or preparation to handle a strategic matter,

though, most of the effort given to the subject will be wasted. One source encourages identification of agenda items as either barking dogs (important and urgent items), nonbarking dogs (items of strategic importance but not urgent), or sleeping dogs (the things no one is willing to talk about, but it is difficult to proceed unless they are addressed).⁷ First deal with the barking dogs in a limited amount of time; then discuss the nonbarking dogs. Sleeping dogs can be brought up once the group begins making progress and gains confidence.

Articulate a meeting strategy that suits your team and its purposes. Variations may include frequency, location, medium and time allotted. Some possibilities include:

- *Prayer.* Does your team need more significant prayer than the perfunctory opening or closing prayer at your weekly staff meetings? Consider making prayer a separate, weekly meeting.
- *Check-in.* Many organizations use a daily or weekly 5- to 15-minute meeting to update one another on their progress on tasks, priorities for the week, travel plans, and even to praise team members publicly for excellent work. The check-in can be a stand-up meeting (no sitting, keep things brief) or even an email.
- *Tactical.* Dealing with the urgent and/or important requires constant attention. The weekly tactical should be fast-moving and highly productive.
- *Strategic.* Equally as

important as the tactical, but often overlooked until urgency pushes them to the forefront, strategic meetings should be given a significant window of time (2-3 hours) to make great gains in organizational progress.

- *Off-Site.* Rather than waiting for an annual (after-the-fact) review, schedule quarterly off-site meetings to consider larger strategic issues, organizational health and personnel assessments. If tactical issues must be considered, deal with them first and limit discussion to no more than one quarter of the scheduled time.

Regardless of which types of meetings you choose, allow for ad hoc meetings as needed, but give them the appropriate context as well.

Clarify the Communication

In a study of meetings, their most frequent purpose was to communicate information.⁸ Why? Do organizations hire illiterate people? “The only rational defense to interrupt talented people with an information dump is if your employees can’t read.”⁹ Since this is not likely the case, the very concept of communication in meetings must be clarified.

Communication is essential for good meetings. Good communication gets the right people to the meeting, because they have been notified of the date, time, place and purpose. More important, good communication garners the necessary preparation—pertinent information for informed decision-making—prior to the meeting. This quality set-up increases the probability of productivity, and productive

meetings send a powerful message to every participant in the organization.

Contain the Content

Good communication facilitates the flow of a meeting. Excellent meetings, as previously mentioned, begin with purpose. That purpose should be easily observed in the agenda. Opinions vary as to the necessity of the agenda. Some see it as an essential for order and accomplishment; others advocate a fluid or spontaneous agenda for maximum effectiveness. Consider the focus of the meeting. Tactical settings accommodate an open agenda more easily than strategic discussions that may be more dependent on previous research. Regardless of whether it is published before the gathering or created in the opening moments, allow the agenda to serve as not only a guide for discussion, but also a promise to participants.

While an agenda can be helpful in keeping a meeting on track, it cannot accomplish the difficult task alone. Limit the number of people invited to the meeting. Twelve or less is a meeting; more than twelve is an assembly. Leaders must move the discussion along, cut off ramblers with firmness and tact and discern when a rabbit is worth chasing. Do not be afraid to be time-conscious in leading a meeting. This does not require a stopwatch, but do try to allow appropriate amounts of time for each agenda item. Trying to do justice to three items in the last five minutes of the meeting frustrates everyone involved, even if they contributed to the inequity.

One excellent way to bring a meeting in under the time budget is to exit on a high note (also known as pulling a George Costanza). If the meeting hits a climax fifteen minutes in, cut it off on a high. There will always be another meeting, and

you will gain the emotional capital of accomplishment and the natural high of exiting a meeting early—both worthy coups in themselves.¹⁰

Control the Conflict

Conflict can single-handedly kill or cinch the success of a meeting. Leaders want to stop negative conflict and stir the positive. Negative conflict erupts from directly criticizing others' positions or indirectly serving them with a verbal slash (e.g., "We'd have to be crazy to do that!"). Such comments serve only to destroy relationships and paralyze any further productive contribution that person might make later in the meeting.¹¹

Positive conflict, on the other hand, produces a high-yield harvest of stronger relationships, open discussion, fewer politics, optimal brainstorming and complete buy-in. Plus, it is fun! Lencioni instructs leaders to ensure interest in meetings by clearly defining the purpose or problem, then drawing all attendees into full participation.¹² Compliment participants when they engage in meaningful conflict. Encourage reluctant silent types to weigh in with their thoughts. What may start with a certain level of discomfort will develop into a healthy practice.

Capture the Creativity

Even if you successfully employ each of the previous directives, your meeting can still fall short of its full potential. People do not have time to rehash scenarios

previously explored, nor can they revisit the dynamic synergy of a particular discussion. You have to capture the good stuff! Start with these simple steps:

1. Stir creativity with a forward focus.¹³ Meetings entrenched in the past and present do not anticipate a preferable future, let alone the enthusiasm and inspiration needed to get there.
2. Close with a quick summary. Recap the decisions reached, action steps required and assignments made. This communication step takes little time and safeguards progress.
3. Take good minutes. In a small meeting, the leader should keep the minutes. Write them as soon as possible, be brief and stick to the important facts.¹⁴

Do You Have the Discipline?

"Most people hate meetings with a passion reserved for mosquitoes and used-car salespeople."¹⁵ Meetings cannot be eliminated altogether, but bad meetings, along with the bad attitudes toward them, can be. The question of change rests on the leader's desk. Do you have the discipline to bring real transformation to this organizational necessity? Simple adjustments can produce rich rewards, not the least of which may be a new outlook on the event previously consigned to the devil's domain!

¹James L. Creighton and James W.R. Adams, *Cyber Meeting: How to Link People and Technology in Your Organization* (New York: AMACOM, 1998), 27.

²Dick Whitney and Melissa Geovagnoli, *75 Cage-Rattling Questions to Change the Way You Work* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 135.

³Creighton and Adams, 13.

⁴Stephen Baker, *I Hate Meetings* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 4.

⁵Patrick J. Sauer, "Escape from Meeting Hell," *Inc.* (May 2004): <http://pf.inc.com/magazine/20040501/escape.html>, downloaded 7-29-04, 1.

⁶Patrick Lencioni, *Death by Meeting* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 235.

⁷Rick Ross and Charlotte Roberts, "Barking and Nonbarking Dogs: The Strategic Practice Field," in *The Dance of Change* by Peter Senge, et. al. (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1999), 88.

⁸Creighton and Adams, 25.

⁹Kenneth Sole, quoted by Patrick J. Sauer, "Escape from Meeting Hell," *Inc.* (May 2004): <http://pf.inc.com/magazine/20040501/escape.html>, downloaded 7-29-04, 7 pp.

¹⁰Sauer, 4.

¹¹Clyde W. Burleson, *Effective Meetings: The Complete Guide* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 52-53.

¹²Lencioni, 226-31.

¹³Sauer, 4.

¹⁴Burleson, 83-84.

¹⁵Whitney and Geovagnoli, 136.