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Make Every Meeting Matter

by Tom Krattenmaker

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Make Every Meeting Matter

by Tom Krattenmaker

Terrence, the communications director of a health services company, grumbles about all the meetings he attends. Yet when the senior management team made a decision on his turf, Terrence was furious about not being invited to the meeting at which the matter was discussed.

His behavior is not as inconsistent as it may first appear. Terrence's problem with meetings is twofold: (1) most he attends are inefficient, unfocused time drains, and (2) meetings at his organization are not always handled with sufficient care to ensure that the right players are there.

"The biggest complaints I hear about meetings are that they're unproductive, that they last too long, that they're unnecessary," says Frances A. Micale, an Atlanta-based consultant and trainer and the author of *Not Another Meeting! A Practical Guide for Facilitating Effective Meetings* (Oasis, 2002). "Yet at their best, meetings can mean everything to an organization," she says. "If you can consistently have good, productive meetings, your company is going to perform better. Better meetings mean better communication and better decisions, and that's going to have a direct impact on the bottom line."

In the old command-and-control days, people did not need to gather together as often. But as the workplace has become more collaborative and democratic, experts say, organizations have needed more meetings to share information, receive people's input, and make group decisions. Moreover, mergers and alliances have increased the need for more interorganization meetings in addition to those taking place within companies.

But while good meetings can make crucial contributions to your company's success, bad ones waste time and hence money. Here are some practical ideas for managers intent on having meetings that enhance, rather than hinder, their organization's success.

DON'T ALWAYS HAVE A MEETING

The solution to an unproductive meeting might be as simple as not having it. Before calling the troops together yet again, managers should ask themselves whether the purpose of the meeting

might be fulfilled some other way. If the point is to share information—which is all too frequently the case in organizations plagued by bad meetings—e-mail, memos, and informal conversations might well work better.

"The question is: 'Why have a meeting?'" says Barbara Streibel, a consultant at Oriel, Inc. (Madison, Wis.), and author of *The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings* (McGraw-Hill, 2002). "The best reason to have a meeting is that you really need interaction between the people who are attending. You need people to share opinions and knowledge, and build a common integrated thought line about the issue at hand. Then a meeting—if done well—is perfect for that."

In a few cases, information sharing might be a legitimate purpose for scheduling a meeting, says Streibel, but only if you need the spontaneous give-and-take that's possible when everyone is together in real time.

Sometimes, says Berkeley, Calif.-based consultant Peggy Klaus, eliminating meetings requires a shift in how you approach management. Micromanagers who want to vet their reports' every move need more meetings, whereas those who effectively delegate are likely to need fewer. "If I have delegated well, I won't need to be there for every decision the team is making. I'll know that Tom or Susan has taken care of things," Klaus says.



DON'T "DISCUSS"

"Discussion" is no longer good enough. Time-starved teams need more than directionless chatter or meant-to-impress progress reports. Productive meetings depend on clearly defined objectives toward which people can work and against which they can measure progress.

"If I'm organizing a meeting, I want to get beyond 'discuss,'" Streibel says. "Maybe 'discuss and decide' or 'discuss and build a plan' or 'discuss and identify key barriers to success.' I want action. I don't need a laundry list of what's happened in the last week."

For example, if the weekly get-together with your staff members has become the bane of your existence (and theirs), insist that everyone—yourself included—pare down her report to actionable issues. Reserve the meeting for items that require the whole group's thinking and action.

SPEND TIME TO SAVE TIME

Terrence, from the first example, would not have missed the one meeting he did care about—and where his presence would actually have been beneficial—if his company better prepared for and communicated about meetings.

If the president's executive assistant had thought through and prepared a good agenda for the weekly senior staff meeting, it might have occurred to her that a wise decision on the proposed community newsletter would require Terrence's presence. (It turns out he had cost figures and survey results that would have compelled the opposite decision.) Even if she had forgotten to invite Terrence, if she routinely circulated the agenda in advance to all managers, Terrence would have known what was coming. Then he could have lobbied to join the meeting or at least sent an e-mail to his boss with the vital information.

"When meetings are at their best, they're a place where people can be creative together, where they can integrate everyone's perspective and knowledge and experience."

Streibel suggests spending 30 to 60 minutes preparing for meetings you are responsible for organizing or leading. Distribute a precise, time-conscious agenda, and assemble the right people. Make sure that participants know they may leave when the meeting turns to affairs not relevant to their portfolios.

Thorough advance work can produce a surprising, and welcome, decision. "By identifying the desired outcome and preparing an agenda ahead of time," says Micale, "you may realize you don't even need a meeting."

PARK DIGRESSIONS, DEFLATE WINDBAGS

A driver who meanders off course will take longer to reach his destination than one who heads directly from A to B. The same applies to meetings, which often take far longer than necessary because participants digress. Several simple tactics can make meetings as brief and efficient as possible.

One is to deal with off-topic ideas by placing them in a "parking lot." On a whiteboard or a piece of paper, list the thoughts and ideas that can be pursued (or not) at a more appropriate time.

Pontificators and windbags also can sabotage a meeting's success even if they stay on topic. Not only do they eat up time, but they also can crowd out less loquacious participants who may have the best ideas. Polite interruptions by the meeting leader might be necessary to cut wordy monologues short. When combined with prompts to reluctant speakers, this can keep everyone involved, which can only mean a better meeting.

At some meetings, everyone seems to want five or 10 minutes of marginally worthwhile airtime, Streibel notes. If that's the custom at your meetings, break people of the habit. "If you indulge them all and you have 10 people at a meeting," Streibel says, "you've just blown at least an hour."

DECLARE A MEETING-FREE DAY

Some companies are declaring meeting-free days, usually Fridays. Others are making certain hours of the day off-limits for meetings. And at some organizations, meetings creep is being fought through use of "stand-ups"—brief huddles where participants work through lean-and-mean agendas in rapid-fire fashion, literally standing up all the while to remind one another that the meeting is no time to lean back and settle in.

Streibel's advice: Use meetings sparingly, and use them well. "I know people often feel that meetings are a waste of time," she says. "But when meetings are at their best, they're a place where people can be creative together, where they can integrate everyone's perspective and knowledge and experience. They can be an important part of a process of coming up with innovative solutions to problems and new and better ways of doing things. Who wouldn't want that?" ♦

Making Every Meeting Matter *continued*

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