

CONDUCTING A PRODUCTIVE MEETING

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http://www.sideroad.com/Meetings/productive_meeting.html

Imagine this scenario: You spend five hours per week in meetings held by others. You look forward to those meetings because they are productive, well run, and efficient. As a participant in these meetings, you know your time has been well spent and you leave feeling valued and appreciated. You spend another three hours per week in meetings you schedule and facilitate. You look forward to these meetings, too, because the participants are always prepared, they offer only insightful and relevant comments, and they maintain their focus on the topic of and reason for the meeting. If you're having a reaction right now that resembles something like this: "Yes, that's exactly what I experience. My meetings are even better than what's described here," then read no further because you're already doing everything I'll recommend below. Congratulations!

On the other hand, if your reaction sounds more like this: "Yea, right! In my dreams! Don't I wish?" Please read on. When you facilitate your next meeting, implement the 10 tips below and your meetings will transform from time-wasters to time-maximizers. No longer will your staff and coworkers grumble; no longer will they feel you've wasted their time. You may not know it, but when a meeting you hold is considered a failure in the eyes of the participants they place all the blame on you. When that happens, the people you need in your meetings will start to find excuses for not being there or they may be less than participative when they do attend.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A MEETING THAT FAILS?

When no clear action items are generated, when participants leave the meeting wondering what the purpose of that was all about, when the participants are wishing they could have been anywhere but here. Likewise if the meeting is a success, participants leave energized and ready to take on the rest of the day. Good meetings become a productive part of their work and not just an additional duty. To help make your meetings productive and worthwhile for all concerned, implement the following tips:

1. Know the purpose of the meeting
2. Prepare an agenda
3. Have a skilled facilitator
4. Have a rotating facilitator for regular meetings
5. Invite the appropriate people

KNOW THE PURPOSE OF THE MEETING

There are only **three good reasons** to hold a meeting:

1. brainstorming
2. delivering info
3. gathering info

Brainstorming in a meeting with a group of people for the purpose of solving a particular-known-problem can result in extremely creative solutions. While not all the solutions will be workable, the activity of brainstorming can be energizing and productive because somewhere in all the silliness and far-fetched solutions are one or two viable, workable ones.

Meetings are also excellent places to deliver information to a large group of people. Delivering this information collectively to the group helps ensure all people get the same information at the same time. This will help reduce the spread of rumors and also reduces the amount of time that might be spent delivering the information to individuals or smaller groups.

Meetings are excellent, too, for gathering information from a group of people. If you manage a team on a collaborative project-say writing a proposal in response to an RFP, then getting the team together to status their work on the proposal and to identify any problem areas can help everyone involved in the meeting have access to that information should they experience a similar problem or discover a solution.

Knowing for which purpose you are holding the meeting will help ensure the meeting has a definite reason for being held. Too often, managers will hold meetings without deciding on the purpose or outcome ahead of time. The result is an air of confusion and people who become frustrated. When participants are confused or frustrated, they rarely are productive in meetings and become even more resistant to attending another.

When you can clearly identify the purpose for the meeting to both yourself and the participants, all concerned can begin to prepare for the meeting.

PREPARE AN AGENDA

Agendas prepared and distributed ahead of time help participants get ready for the meeting. Unfortunately, too many meetings are held without this essential point of preparation. The result is a group of people called together, but they don't know the purpose or the topic of the meeting. Consequently, they cannot prepare for the meeting. Essentially, they walk in the room-pencil and pad in hand-without any idea what will be discussed. This can be terribly embarrassing, especially when one of them is put on the spot to answer a question or to speak to an issue that they didn't know was going to be discussed.

To help others be successful attending our meetings, let them know the topic of the meeting, the purpose for holding it, and the specific items that will be discussed. Doing this will give them the opportunity to be fully prepared while avoiding the possibility of embarrassment as well as wasted time.

For agendas to be really effective, assign timeframes to each topic of discussion. The timeframes should be published on the agenda so that participants know how long will be spent on each item. This will prevent someone from preparing a 30-minute discussion point for an item only allotted 5 minutes on the agenda.

When allotting timeframes to agenda items, make those timeframes appropriate to the topic. For instance, if we're holding a 45-minute meeting and plan to discuss three items, each item does not receive an equal portion of time. Item A may actually need only 5 minutes of discussion while Item B may require 35 minutes to discuss. That leaves 5 minutes for Item C. But don't forget the summary! You'll need time to wrap up the meeting, recap action items (see Tip 8), and close the meeting.

Thinking through the appropriate time frames for each item will help you as the facilitator or leader of the meeting have a clear picture of your expectations. When you have this clear picture, it's easier to keep the meeting going according to plan.

A final word about agendas: they must be published ahead of time. It does absolutely no good to prepare an agenda and assign timeframes to the items on that agenda if no one attending the meeting is aware of them. Instead, distribute the agenda ahead of time—at least 24 hours but preferably two to three days ahead of the meeting. This will allow people to prepare and to bring up known problems so that you, as the leader, will be completely prepared.

For instance, if you publish an agenda as outlined above and a participant has more knowledge about Item A than you, this person may bring to your attention that discussing that item will really take 20 minutes. Knowing this ahead of time will allow you to adjust the timing for the meeting or adjust the number of items to be discussed during the meeting. You'll be much better off knowing this ahead of time rather than finding it out at the last minute.

HAVE A SKILLED FACILITATOR

A skilled facilitator is the person who keeps the meeting on track and on topic. The facilitator is responsible for preparing the agenda and distributing it as well as ensuring the meeting sticks to the agenda. The facilitator doesn't necessarily have to be the person holding the meeting. In fact, sometimes it's better to have someone other than the person who called the meeting to facilitate it. Why? It may be the person who called the meeting who typically derails it.

If there is a designated facilitator present, that person can help keep the person who called the meeting on agenda. Of course, this requires that the person calling the meeting be aware that they are not always the best choice for running or facilitating the meeting. This level of self-awareness can be very beneficial and serve to solve significant relationship problems in the department or organization.

HAVE A ROTATING FACILITATOR FOR REGULAR MEETINGS

If you hold regular meetings with essentially the same team of people present at each meeting, having each person take a turn facilitating the meetings can help cultivate your team into a group of skilled facilitators. This is especially effective when you want to grow the professionalism and expand the skills of your team.

Allowing a different individual to facilitate each meeting will help them each get a sense of what it's like to have the responsibility for facilitating, to experience preparing the agenda, and to appreciate what meetings are like from the facilitator's point of view. This can be a particularly effective tactic when you have one or two habitual disrupters in your meetings.

Assigning the role of facilitating to someone who generally disrupts the meeting may help that person see just how difficult it is to keep each participant's attention as it is. The disruptions only make it worse. Of course, if you are going to use this strategy you can't simply single out the disrupters and only "make" them facilitate. The lesson must be subtle, so rotating the responsibility through the entire team is most effective.

A third advantage to rotating the role of facilitator among the participants is that doing so removes some of the responsibility for the meeting from your shoulders. Yes, you'll have to mentor your facilitators to help them be successful in their roles; at the same time, however, you'll find that once you've modeled for them what the agenda should contain and how to allot the timeframes they will then be able, for the most part, to run with that responsibility leaving you free for other duties.

INVITE THE APPROPRIATE PEOPLE

A serious frustration point and time-waster is when people who need to be in a meeting weren't invited and those that were invited didn't need to be there. Having the right people at the meeting is essential to ensuring topics can be covered efficiently and completely.

How do we figure out who to include? By knowing what we want to accomplish (brainstorm, deliver information, or gather information) and what our specific agenda items are we can ensure the right people are present. The clearer we are on these two points, the easier it is to decide who to involve in the meeting.

For instance, Joe, the head of the production department, might be useful to have at the meeting; but it might really be June, the lead on similar past projects who would be better because of her experience and the light she can shed on potential problems. Perhaps all Joe needs is a summary of what was discussed rather than to take the time out of his day to attend a meeting June could handle.