

## HOW TO LEAD A BAD MEETING

Many years ago I attended what I would call a bad meeting. It was the traditional setting: Long table with 6 people on each side, a meeting facilitator at the head and someone (*me as it turns out*) at the opposite end. It was, by far, the most boring meeting of my life. The frustration and anxiety I experienced in those two long hours are vividly etched in my memory. I can't get them out even today when I think of that experience.



Understand, I'm one of those people who desperately wants to fill any leadership hole I see. I desperately wanted to, but refrained on this occasion. Besides the fact that I likely would have done just as bad a job (*though I didn't think so at the time*) I also had little voice or authority in the room. I was the newbie.

I remember watching the gentleman sitting next to me pull out documents and a legal pad and evidently begin doing work from his office. He looked to be 100% disengaged from the discussion. I remember watching the seconds tick by on my watch just like I did while in high school. When the meeting was over I was the first one out the door. I have no idea where I went, I just remember thinking, "*I need to get out of here.*"

I know you are intrigued. You have been wondering for weeks now just how you can lead a meeting as frustrating, ineffective, unproductive, and boring as this one. Today is your day. Following are my top suggestions on leading bad meetings.

## How to Lead a Bad Meeting

- **Begin the meeting late.** Whatever you do, be sure to NOT start the meeting until everyone has arrived. Even better, show up late yourself to the meeting.
- **Kill several trees.** Translation: hand out lots of documents and papers. Make sure several of the documents were handed out at the last meeting. To add a layer of confusion to the meeting, include a document or two which you will never explain or refer to. Lots of paper will help you feel important and will require everyone to shuffle things around a lot and look busy.
- **Take attendance before you begin.** You know, like your teacher's did in school. This will remind the team that you are in charge and that they should never miss a meeting.
- **Vote on the previous meeting's minutes.** This is especially effective when there is no reason to vote on the previous meeting's minutes (for example: it's not a meeting that requires a vote based on an article in your organisation's by-laws.) The best way to facilitate this act of boredom is to request that everyone read the minutes from top to bottom; then ask for a motion to accept the minutes, for a second motion, and be sure that all in favour says, "I". Don't forget to personally record who made the first motion and who seconded as well.
- **From the minutes, go over all of the previous meeting's discussions, adding commentary and inviting additional discussion.** One of the best ways to frustrate your team is by spending the bulk of your meeting re-hashing conversations and decisions that have already been made.
- **Recruit a scribe or note-taker on the fly.** In particular, do so after you've already led the meeting for 15 minutes and ask the scribe to write down what's already happened. You can also ensure your scribe loses several hours sleep that night if you ask her about every 4-5 minutes, "Did you get that in the minutes?"
- **Make sure there are several more agenda items on the meeting agenda than you will have time to address.** This will provide an amazing tension in the room as the participants wonder if the meeting was meant to be an all-day meeting. It will also create an added layer of discontentment because the meetings will never seem to accomplish the designated goals.
- **Do most of the talking.** You love the sound of your own voice as well as your own opinions, so you know your team will hang on your every word. Well, not really. If they hung on your every word the meeting wouldn't be very boring would it? No. Just talk a lot and make sure what you have to say is mostly irrelevant and delivered with the least amount of energy and passion as possible. Think of your History Professor in college.
- **Lose track of the conversation.** If you want to successfully lead a bad meeting it is imperative that you NOT stay on track. Focus is your enemy. Go on as many rabbit trails as you want, especially if they aren't on the agenda or if they are discussions you have already hashed over in past meetings. Make sure you never really get back to the agenda item. Just close down one of the rabbit trail discussions, make sure it was recorded in the minutes, and move on to the next agenda item. Bonus idea: skip one agenda item.

- **Interrupt people.** If people start talking, wait until they just start to express their point and then finish their sentence for them. Another tactic would be to simply thank them for their comments and move on to the next agenda item without inviting other thoughts. Note: never ask your note-taker if they got other people's comments in the minutes, just yours.
- **Veto discussions.** Very important. If you are the leader of the organisation it is very effective to allow the team to discuss the topic at hand without your input for a long time (contrary to the "interrupt people" suggestion above). Once they have reached general consensus and are motivated about the progress made, stop the discussion, thank everyone for their comments, and then let everyone know that you have a better idea. Don't allow the team to question your decision, just move on to the next agenda item. Another way to build this layer of frustration in your team is to have someone else lead the discussion while you are away on a business trip and then veto the decisions made in the room later in the week via email. These tactics require preparation: you have to have already made up your mind about what you want to do, before you ask for the team's input.
- **Assume everyone is on board.** This is easy to do. Just make sure you NEVER ask people if they understand or agree with the ideas or decisions being made. Don't encourage questions either. If someone does ask a question, let them know they will understand once the discussion is over. Don't follow up later to find out if that happened. Just assume they figured it out. Also, it's really good to be slightly condescending when people ask questions. This will help them realise that they are big boys and girls and should be able to figure out what's going on themselves. This will also ensure others don't ask questions later in the meeting.
- **Don't hold anyone accountable (including yourself).** I know this sounds like a contrary tactic to leading bad meetings. Doesn't it make more sense to hold people accountable and let them know what a bad job they are doing every time they not complete a task? No. If you want to effectively lead a bad meeting, make sure that nobody really gets held accountable for the action items assigned to them. One good way to do this is to NOT remind them of the action items. Also, don't worry about setting due dates. If there is a due date and something doesn't get done, just set a new due date. Using these methods, you will be sure to get almost nothing done as a team.
- **Mix things up.** You most likely have already got this one down. Team leaders pretty much naturally do this one. That said, it's worth mentioning just in case you aren't doing it. Remember, we're trying to ensure we lead a bad meeting. To do that, mix up detail oriented tactical discussions with big picture strategic discussions all in the same meeting. This method will confuse and exhaust your team over the long haul.
- **Avoid constructive conflict.** You probably have this one figured out too. Best case, avoid all conflict. If you can't prevent conflict, then simply pick which side of the conflict you are on and join in the battle. The key to avoiding constructive conflict is to ensure that everyone involved is defensive and focused on protecting themselves and their ideas. Do that, and you will succeed every time in alienating and destroying team trust.

- **Go long.** No. That's not a football reference. I just mean that you should make sure your meetings all go 20-30 minutes longer than scheduled. Bonus: start a new discussion 2 minutes before (or after) the meeting is supposed to end.

If you have discovered that you are better at leading bad meetings than you realised, rest assured I have developed and utilised nearly all of the above techniques myself.

Humour aside- do the exact opposite of these and you should be able to lead a good and effective meeting.

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*<http://www.transformingleader.org/2011/01/how-to-lead-bad-meeting.html>*