

## WAS THAT A GOOD MEETING OR A BAD ONE?

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Many organisations have been swamped by information overload. Contrary to popular opinion, you can indeed have too much of an otherwise good thing. Information is good, particularly when you have the right information, in the right quantities, at the right time. Alas, in too many organisations, directives for urgency and quantity have replaced deliberateness and quality. As a result, surveys show, people within the organisation feel overwhelmed by the non-stop avalanche of information that seems to careen their way.

One reason for perceptions of information overload -- and there are several reasons -- is the epidemic of unnecessary or inefficient meetings. Take any large organisation, in particular, and you're likely to see employees who spend the majority of their time going from one meeting to another. At a fair share of these meetings, attendees arrive ill-prepared and the conversation meanders along for hours in a meeting that could take 15 or 30 minutes, if it needs to occur at all. If you add this to less-than-optimal organisational skills that can make remaining non-meeting time efficient and productive, it's easy to see where the flood of information can become overwhelming.

What distinguishes an effective meeting from one that is a complete waste of time? Here are five factors that help ensure a good meeting:

1. Having a good reason to meet in the first place;
2. Having an agenda that clearly states the purpose of the meeting and key steps to satisfying that purpose by the end of the meeting;
3. Stating a timeframe at the beginning of the meeting and sticking to it, with few exceptions;
4. Requiring that participants come prepared to discuss the topics on the agenda, meaning that participants have received the agenda and have been told what's expected from them personally;
5. Having some degree of skilled facilitation -- someone who can keep participants focused on the agenda items and can navigate prickly interpersonal issues so that the meeting is effective instead of dysfunctional.

And what about those meetings that disintegrate into a colossal waste of time and energy, contributing to unproductive information-overload?

Among the worst meetings are those that exhibit the opposite of the "good rules" stated above: There isn't a good reason for the meeting, there's a poor agenda or none at all, the meeting "creeps" its way into a several-hour ordeal, participants arrive unprepared, and/or there is no skilled facilitation. The result? Wasted time and deflated energy for the participants, not to mention a culture of meeting-dread.

Everyone has stories of horrible meetings, and a few examples of good ones. Earlier in my career, I facilitated public meetings about hazardous waste clean-ups that were taking place in various communities, so I have seen more than my share of tense or awful meetings. But in the workplace, most fall into the "out of control" or "unnecessary" categories. One of the worst of these that I've experienced saw six participants droning on for four-and-one-half hours about which category should appear in the first column of a planning document, and it really didn't matter. It was a hideous waste of time.

Another meeting faux-pas occurred when a corporate representative stood up at a community meeting and made a statement that showed he didn't even think about the situation, or comment, from the community members' perspective. He ended up getting a 30-minute tongue-lashing from an elected state legislator who was in the audience (and campaigning for re-election).

In another case, employees from the company's information technology department routinely showed up unprepared. When asked at one meeting to give a presentation on the department's progress, the representative positioned himself in an alcove of the meeting room, which meant that most participants couldn't even see him and thus had trouble hearing him! Needless to say, it didn't make a very good impression, but worse, no one at the meeting brought it to his attention or asked him to reposition himself -- they just complained about it afterward. The result? Wasted time during the meeting itself, and more wasted time rehashing it later.

Most workplace meetings are just disorganised and go well beyond a necessary timeframe, if they need to happen at all -- and many do not. Often, such meetings show the confusion that exists in many organisations between a business meeting and a social function. Business meetings occur to define and move a business strategy forward, to ensure that the group is on the same page, to share vital information needed to keep various activities moving along in a way that is aligned with the bigger-picture strategy or goals.

A social gathering allows people to get together to enjoy one another, share personal information, follow a more relaxed timeline, and chat about various topics of shared interest. Too many corporate -- and more than a few non-profit -- meetings are a murky hybrid, when they should be scheduled and facilitated, clearly, as one or the other. Or they're infected by a bureaucratic malaise that eats away at purposefulness, efficiency, and clarity.

Good meetings are more rare, but you know when you're attending one. The schedule and purpose are clear, participants are prepared, conversation is dynamic, and the meeting ends promptly, with next steps defined and confirmed among all participants. The meeting may be pleasant, and even fun, and there may exist an enjoyable camaraderie amongst participants. But the meeting is clearly about moving forward the work of the day and is energised by the preparation and clear-focus of its participants.

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*Conscious communication, inspired leadership, personal-mastery, and visionary enterprise concepts are shared at length in Big Vision, Small Business , a new book by Jamie S. Walters, as well as in Ivy Sea's organisational consulting and entrepreneurial-coaching services and award-winning Web library.*

*<http://www.inc.com/articles/2003/01/25007.html>*