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## Effective Meetings

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Effective Meetings

Five rules for holding successful meetings

FROM: [SEP-OCT 2004 ISSUE](#) | BY [MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI](#)

Most professionals attend more than 60 meetings a month. And most have attended the meeting from hell, probably more than once. Research shows that over 90 per cent of meeting-goers admit to daydreaming; over 70 per cent do other work during meetings; and almost 40 per cent say that they have occasionally dozed off while in a meeting.

Clearly, there are a lot of non-productive meetings taking place across the country every day. But consider this: a two-hour meeting with five attendees held once a week costs your organization \$14,000 annually (using a base annual salary of \$50,000). And this total does not include the costs associated with employee benefits, lost productivity, facilities, and equipment. Unquestionably, there's a sound business case for holding productive meetings. Doing so is actually quite simple ... if you keep these five golden rules in mind.

### Rule #1

Always issue an agenda, distributed at least 48 hours in advance of the meeting. If you find yourself calling an unplanned or emergency meeting, use the first 10 minutes to develop a quick agenda on a whiteboard or flipchart, and don't proceed until you've reached agreement on it. One of the best and easiest ways to develop an agenda is to use a table format with a minimum of four columns as follows:

1. The agenda item
2. The name of the person responsible for leading and/or facilitating the agenda item
3. The required outcome for the agenda item, e.g. group discussion, information, update, decision, consensus, action, round-table reporting
4. The allotted time for the agenda item (Make sure that the total of the allotted times does not exceed the total time set aside for the meeting!)

As an example, your agenda may contain the following items:

- Purchasing software rollout: Amy Harris, IT lead; project update; 10 minutes
- Customer service survey results: Reena Davis, customer service manager; information and action on complaints; 30 minutes
- Software training vendor selection: Bob Edwards, procurement specialist; decision; 15 minutes

You may choose to add additional columns to your agenda based on your specific needs.

### Rule #2

Establish three key meeting roles for every meeting — chairperson, timekeeper, and minute-taker — filled by three different people. If you hold recurring meetings, rotate the roles of the chairperson, timekeeper, and minute-taker for each meeting.

The benefits of rotation are two-fold — all participants develop meeting skills, and, perhaps more importantly, there

is greater awareness and respect for the challenges inherent in these roles. This golden rule applies for unplanned or emergency meetings as well: if you don't assign these roles, an emergency meeting can quickly turn into a waste of time.

The chairperson is responsible for facilitating the meeting — making sure all relevant input is being solicited and gathered, and smoothing over rough spots as necessary. The timekeeper's role in a meeting is paramount — he or she is responsible for letting participants know when the allotted time for an agenda item is up. The timekeeper may need to be firm with participants to ensure that they stick to the agenda.

Often, agenda items crop up that really do require additional discussion beyond the time frame allotted in the agenda. At that point, the chairperson has two choices — either get agreement to adjust the agenda by reducing or eliminating another item, or send the item being discussed to the "parking lot." The parking lot is a designated whiteboard or flipchart where outstanding issues are logged, with an understanding that they will be tabled as agenda items at a future meeting. The parking lot approach is a very effective way to keep a meeting moving while still respecting other points of view. The minute-taker's role is exactly what it sounds like — he or she is responsible for producing a written record about key aspects of the meeting ... which leads us to Rule #3.

### **Rule #3**

Always take minutes of meetings, and issue them within 48 hours. Minutes provide a written record of what happened at a meeting, but because it sounds like a lot of work, many people balk at this rule. However, meeting minutes do not need to be long or complicated. An effective and popular approach is to focus only on recording action items. If you take this approach, then you can once again use a table format, this time with a minimum of three columns as follows:

1. The action item
2. The person responsible for the action item
3. The deadline

As with the agenda, you may choose to add columns based on specific needs. For instance, if you have sent items to the parking lot, you will need to make sure that they are recorded in the minutes so that they can be addressed in a future meeting. If you hold recurring meetings, begin each meeting by reviewing action items from the last meeting. This creates accountability for action.

### **Rule #4**

Start your meetings promptly. It is a powerful gesture of respect to those who choose to respect *your* time. This rule can be a challenge if you work in an organization where punctuality is not a virtue. Nevertheless, persist. Noted author Jack Canfield says, "We teach others how to treat us, and sometimes, we have to un-teach them before we can re-teach them."

If you work in an organization where you have inadvertently taught people that it's acceptable not to respect your time, then recognize that you may need to un-teach and then re-teach them. Developing a reputation for always starting meetings on time is an effective way to do this. When a latecomer finally arrives, don't disrupt the meeting to review what's happened prior to their arrival, unless of course he or she is a key figure (or your boss!) in your meeting.

### **Rule #5**

Develop strategies to deal with early leavers, as that too can disrupt and decrease the productivity of a meeting. One effective method is to address the subject when obtaining agreement on the agenda at the beginning of the meeting: point out the ending time and ask if anyone has a problem with it. Those with legitimate excuses will tell you then. Then again, others in your meeting may have already made you aware of their need to leave early: this is a good chance to let the rest of the group know so that no one is surprised when they leave and their departure causes a minimum of disruption.

### **Two Revolutionary Ideas**

If you frequently attend meetings where everyone talks at the same time and nobody listens to anybody else, try holding a ball meeting. All you need to do is get a tennis ball and follow this simple rule: he or she who holds the ball gets to speak. Enough said.

You may also have attended meetings that have no apparent purpose, go on and on, and come to no visible conclusion. The one solution: hold a wall meeting. There are only two rules: No coffee and everyone at the meeting must stand up leaning against the wall for the duration of the meeting. The result: attendees remain focused and attentive, and agenda items are addressed and resolved in record time. Take it from someone who's attended her fair share of unproductive meetings.

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