

Tips for Managing Effective Meetings

BY DIANA RIVENBURGH

I often hear people say that they spend so much time in meetings they don't have time to get their "real" work done. How often have you tried to conduct a meeting and found participants busy responding to emails on their laptops or Blackberries? Meeting guidelines used to cover things like "no smoking" now they include "no cell phones or email." Wasting time in meetings is one of the largest productivity drains on companies. However, there are times when meetings are necessary and useful. Face time is important to build relationships and effective communication is critical to keep people aligned and promote change.

Spending meeting time wisely is not only an issue for companies, but also affects not-for-profit organizations. Marion Dreyfus, executive director of the LI Center for Business and Professional Women, states that the organization has suggested meeting guidelines for their board of directors and their committee chairs to use. According to Dreyfus, "our board and committee members are very busy business professionals who are volunteering their time to help the organization. We want to make sure that we respect their time and that they get the most from their interactions with us."

Here are some tips to help you and your organization better manage meetings and conference calls:

Prepare for the meeting

- First, decide if a meeting is needed. Consider the purpose, participants and alternative approaches for communicating.
- Have clear goals for what you want to accomplish in the meeting.
- Have an agenda. Send out an agenda prior to the meeting on the topics to include, who will facilitate each and the timing for each item. Include meeting details (e.g., time and location).
- Decide who should attend. Invite peo-

ple important to the topic area; consider educational value for some attendees. Watch the size of the group.

- Determine where and when to hold the meeting. Select a time that is convenient for all and where participants will be able to focus.

- Gather materials and information needed for the meeting and bring any assigned pre-work or follow-up items from the last meeting. Don't wait until the last minute to do this.

- Arrange for refreshments for longer meetings or those that will take place during a meal time. Be wary of loading people up with only sugar and caffeine; have healthy choices.

- Be prepared to present. Some sessions may require rehearsing prior to the presentation; others will merely warrant reviewing notes and materials.

- Visualize a positive meeting and then work to make this a reality.

Open the meeting

- Greet participants and conduct introductions if needed.

- Establish ground rules. Get everyone on the same page about what behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable in order to promote the right environment.

- State objectives for the meeting and share the agenda.

Conduct the meeting

- Listen to the people in the room. Allow others to speak. This may bring forward new ideas and will promote buy in for decisions.

- Promote participation. Encourage input and sharing of ideas; don't shut others down. Ask questions and solicit examples; assign others to facilitate; call on others and provide recognition.

- Make eye contact with others. This helps to connect others to your message.

- Start and end on time. Respect others. Set an example by being a stickler for start and end times.

- Don't get sidetracked; stay focused. Use a "parking lot" to track topics to follow up on.

- Stop talking every now and then, especially on conference calls when you can't see others who may want to add something or ask a question.



- Read the body language of those in the room. Consider your own body language.
- Facilitate conflicts. Find sources of agreement and allow each party to be heard. Diffuse tension with humor and focus on solutions — not blame.
- Consider opportunities for learning by asking others to present or inviting guest speakers.
- Schedule breaks for longer meetings. People think better when they are given a chance to recharge.

Close the meeting

Don't skip this part. It provides an opportunity to ensure you are all on the same page.

- Summarize the main points of the meeting.
- Gain commitment on decisions and actions.
- End on a positive note. Encourage action.

After the meeting

- Assess the effectiveness of the meeting.
- Put follow-up items on the calendar to remind you to follow up for action.
- Delegate follow-up items if appropriate.
- Follow through on commitments you have made and hold others accountable for theirs.

Even if you are not the one hosting the meeting, you can have an influence on making other meetings you attend more effective. Respectfully share tips on effective meetings with your boss, co-workers and others. ♦



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