

Getting the most out of meetings

What to do about meetings? Employees protest about too many meetings. Yet the almost universal complaint of “lousy communication around here” trumps it. What’s a manager to do?



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The problem isn’t too many meetings, but too many lousy meetings.

So what’s the secret to productive meetings? The first step is to clearly define the meeting’s purpose.

Let’s start with a status meeting. This should be a regular crisp, stand-up meeting located in front of the team’s visual scoreboard.

- Yesterday’s numbers (or significant accomplishments).
- Summary of new orders received and backlog (or measure of incoming work).
- New or unexpected barriers that may impact the day and the current plan for dealing with them.
- Appropriate recognition for individuals including notable accomplishments, employment anniversaries, or birthdays.

Short questions are allowed to ensure information is fully understood. In-depth discussion regarding issues, however, should be taken offline and involve only impacted participants.

That’s it. My first experience with a daily stand-up meeting was observing Hach’s dozen or so managers relate in 10-15 minutes the status of their 300-employee organization. The meeting reminded me of a well-run track meet with each participant prepared and sharing just the necessary facts. The meeting started on time. I left thinking “these folks know their business!”

Decision-making or brainstorming meetings add layers of complexity. The goal is to actually produce an idea or decision.

The meeting facilitator’s skills are vital, as is preparation. What do you want to accomplish with this meeting? Be specific.

Who should participate? Diverse thinkers will likely enhance the quality of ideas generated.

When inviting participants, less is more. In general, boss and subordinate should not be involved in the same meeting. The need to involve both may be an indication of an over-controlling supervisor or an incompetent employee.

Where and when should the meeting be held? Does this meeting need to be held off-site to avoid interruptions? When will participants most likely be focused and productive?

Envision the successful meeting. Document and share the agenda and the required preparation of participants. Identify potential risks to success and take actions to mini-

mize them before the meeting.

Running a successful meeting is akin to protecting growing crops. Tangent discussions are the weeds of meetings. Aggressive comments by members that turn off others are insects. Both can destroy yield if not promptly identified and addressed.

Preparation can head off these issues by spending a little time upfront clarifying ground rules. A hand-held “DETOUR” placard placed on the table can be a useful tool for any member to identify when the conversation is straying.

Bring the meeting to a fruitful conclusion. Be deliberate.

- What did we decide? Write it down.
- Who is doing what and when?
- Is everyone committed to the decision? Ask participants one at a time.

Finally, distribute documentation of your agreement. You and your team have spent too much time to lose your efforts to poor memories.

A standing agenda item is essential with typical topics consisting of:

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