



Meeting Mania!

Are ineffective business meetings a drag on your effectiveness?

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COMPANY BUSINESS MEETINGS CAN be a real pain. Chances are, you've probably asked yourself, "When are they going to cut out a few of these useless meetings and let me get some work done?" I heard this recently from my friend Lisa, a Project Manager for an early-stage pharmaceutical firm. She felt the company was in danger of becoming unproductive due to the frequency and ineffectiveness of their meetings. When this meeting-mania was pointed out to the CEO, he responded that success in the pharmaceutical industry demands much planning and coordination—and with that comes meetings.

"I agree that we could be more effective," he responded. "But our success in staff meetings appears to me to be determined by the participants themselves. As a Project Manager, I think it is your job to make certain that the attendees of your regular meetings are more effective participants." And then he left it up to Lisa to come up with some recommendations.

As Lisa found, there has been a lot written about *conducting* productive meetings, but very little about how to be a better *participant* in a meeting. I shared with her some views that I had been building over the years, because I am another one of those people who can't stand to be in ineffective, time-wasting business meetings.

Tips For Better Meetings

Pre-Meeting Preparation: I'm always surprised by the number of people who just "show up" for a meeting without any real thought given to the topic or where they can contribute. In one recent meeting at our company, there were several embarrassing moments for a couple of the team members who hadn't read the memo about the day's agenda. Here are a number of items to take care of in advance of your next business meeting:

- Read all documents that have been circulated about the meeting.
- Form some suggestions based on what you have read.
- Gather evidence that would support the suggestions you are going to make.
- Run the suggestion through your mind so that you can present your idea in a concise, powerful manner.
- Think about allies who may be able to support your idea in the meeting and prepare them in advance for this.

A meeting is an ideal opportunity to impress those above you—sometimes at many levels above you—with how seriously you take your job. Similarly, it is also a platform that can show management exactly how crude your verbal skills are. When this happens, it is usually because of poor pre-meeting preparation.

Defuse Sticky Issues: One important aspect of pre-meeting preparation is to take the edge off a potential interpersonal conflict in advance. If you sense that one of your suggestions is going to adversely affect a colleague, it might be wise to call and advise her that you plan to bring up a certain course of action at the meeting. This has the effect of defusing the potential for problems, and possibly convert the relationship into one of allies rather than antagonists. (Of course, if you work in a particularly political environment, you've just tipped off someone who can come to the meeting prepared to shoot you down.)

There is nothing more impressive in a business meeting than a person who has defused the political elements and smoothed the way for a new concept with the affected team members in advance.

Choose Your Moment: When you decide to speak up is probably just as important as what you are going to say. If you jump in too soon with a ground-breaking thought, you may interrupt the group's orientation process—that first part of a meeting where everyone takes a few moments to get comfortable with the agenda and the chemistry at work around the table. It's usually best to wait until a time when your idea fits in naturally to the discussion.

Be Flexible: Another key point is to always leave yourself open to variations of the concept. Never drop a new idea on a group and suggest that the concept is perfectly formed. Always leave a little "wiggle room" in the idea for some massaging by the rest of the team. If your concept is still a bit tentative, back into it gradually by tagging it onto a comment about another person's idea. Despite how forcefully you present your thoughts, remember not to be too defensive if it starts going against you. The last thing that a weekly (or more often) team meeting needs is someone who is ultra-defensive or whiney when he doesn't get his way.

Be a Creator and Not Just a Critic: One of the purposes of a meeting is to critically analyze current projects and future potentials. But don't you hate it when there are always one or two people who shoot everything down, or who continue to criticize but don't ever seem to come up with a solution? If you create new ideas and help to keep your meetings full of spark and energy, it will inspire others to do the same. And

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when you need to be a critic, others will then recognize that this isn't your only act.

Here are three critical phrases that you should avoid bringing with you to a meeting, as they are sure-fire killers of creative thinking: "We've tried it and it didn't work," "I can give you five reasons why it won't work," and "We're doing very well, so why tamper with success?"

Pick Up the Ball: If you are truly interested in being recognized for your part in the meeting, be the one who offers to follow-up on some important matter at the close. In this way, you'll have the opportunity to sum up your findings at the next session. As long as you don't appear manipulative, "grabbing" responsibility where you find it in these meetings is probably a very good thing for your career.

As Lisa and I both found after studying this subject a bit further, the average boring business meeting can go through quite a radical transformation if just a few of the participants learn to practice and promote skills like the ones mentioned above. ■

Footnote

1: *The Business Meetings Sourcebook*, Mina, Eli. AMACOM, NYC, NY, 2002.

ONE OF THE BEST RESOURCES you could find for planning and coordinating business meetings (or figuring out what's wrong with your current meetings) is a new release from AMACOM. This very large book bills itself as *A Practical Guide to Better Meetings and Shared Decision Making* and it is as complete a text as you could ever find about business meetings. Personally, I cleared some room on my bookshelf for this hefty gem—a book that details every aspect of setting up or debugging a business meeting.

In particular, the *Troubleshooting Guide* is worth the price of the book (\$65.00 US). If you are a meeting organizer, or a Project Manager like my friend Lisa, you will find these pages of troubleshooting tips to be invaluable. Every possible meeting ailment is analyzed, with a number of suggestions for each, including verbiage that you can use to counter such issues as "Overtime Presenters," "Coffee Break Debates," "Side Conversations and Interruptions," and "Patronizing Participants."

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