Make Meetings Less Dreaded

By Stuart R. Levine

Mention the word “meetings” to a group of managers, and you’re likely to hear at least one person groan. Meetings are the bane of our existence—the thing we love to loathe. Ineffectively run meetings cost companies hundreds of thousands of dollars each year and become career stoppers for managers. People and their time are your company’s resources, and it’s your job as the manager to maximize the value of both to the organization.

Meetings that reflect these best practices become valued opportunities to communicate and learn instead of resented gauntlets we’re required to run.

Before Anyone Convenes

The following steps will help you and your meeting attendees prepare for the meeting:

- **Define your purpose.** Without clarity about what you’re trying to achieve, there is no way to achieve it effectively.
- **Meet only when necessary.** Ask yourself honestly, do you really have to meet, or are you getting people together because it’s the only way to get them to review documents that can be e-mailed or faxed?
- **Create an agenda.** Always create an agenda to focus the conversation on your purpose and always begin the agenda with a clear purpose statement. If you are a participant and there’s no agenda, ask for one. If you attend a meeting with no agenda on the table, you can say, “I’d like to have a sense of what we’re here to accomplish and sketch out a quick agenda.”
- **Involv only the people necessary.** Having people in your meetings is a luxury because their time is precious to the company and to their families. Invite carefully. (Pretend you’re paying for their time because, in a sense, you are.)
- **Prepare and give participants the time and materials to do the same.** If you’re holding the meeting, distribute the agenda at least 24 hours in advance, 72 hours if you need colleagues to review documents before the meeting.
  If you’re invited to attend a meeting, always schedule time to review the advance materials. If it’s not clear to you why you’ve been invited to a meeting, ask. A simple e-mail saying, “I’m not sure what value I’ll add in this meeting; what did you have in mind when you put me on the list?” will do the job.

In the Room

Stick to these suggestions, and your meeting will stay on track:

- **Start and end on time.** No matter how many people are in the room, shut the door when the meeting is scheduled to start. Waiting for latecomers is the practical equivalent of saying to those who came on time, “Their time is more valuable than yours.” Always end on time unless you’ve asked for permission to run over and everyone in the room has agreed.
- **Get to the point.** If it’s your meeting, begin by stating your purpose and then stay focused on it. If you’ve been invited, link every comment you make back to the meeting’s objective.
• **Keep things on course.** The chair is primarily responsible for this, but everyone in the room is free to respectfully comment if they believe a discussion is off course and request that an “out-of-scope” conversation be taken off-line.

• **When you’re in agreement, move on.** Don’t give in to the temptation of discussing how much you agree and sharing war stories about how right you are. When you say, “I think we’re in agreement,” it should be a signal to everyone that you’re moving on.

• **Wrap with action steps and commitments.** At the close of the meeting, define next steps. Then determine who will own each and by when they can deliver.

**Follow-Through**

A meeting is pointless without these follow-up action items:

• **Send meeting notes within 24 hours.** At a minimum, these notes should capture the action steps defined by the group, who is accountable and deadlines agreed to.

• **Facilitate follow-through to ensure results.** As each deadline approaches, send an e-mail to each task’s owner reminding him of the deadline and offering help or assistance to meet it. As participants deliver on their commitments, send a note thanking them for following through and copy everyone who attended the meeting.

**Putting Steps into Action**

Commit to using these best practices to get the strongest result with the leanest resources and track how consistently you achieve your objective. I can almost guarantee that you’ll be hooked.

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