Ten Steps to a Productive, Information-rich Meeting

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Many business professionals would agree that too much time is wasted in meetings. Why do we misuse this activity? Is it because we spend so much time with technology that we are simply desperate for human interaction? Whatever the reason, the purpose of the business meeting is critical to the success of many organizations. Unfortunately, few people are taught how to conduct a meeting. While effective facilitation takes practice, ten tips will help you manage productive, information-rich meetings.

1. Determine the purpose. If you are conducting a periodic staff meeting, the purpose will be to review recent events and projects on a general basis. If the meeting is specific to a project, more in-depth information will be shared. In any case, be sure there is one overall purpose.
2. Invite the right people. Invite only those who can and should actively participate. Ford Motor Company's CEO, Alan Mulally, recently announced a push to reduce the number of people in meetings, ensuring only those who can truly add value are in attendance. This makes meeting participants (and everyone else) more productive.

3. Create an agenda. For your own purpose, determine how much time you will spend on each topic. Obviously, if the individual times add up to more time than you've given for the meeting, you will not stay on schedule! We use this technique even in weeklong training sessions, dividing time up into 10-minute increments!

4. Set rules. Determine ground rules. Describe your willingness to discuss unlisted items in another conversation or meeting. Ground rules should also include an assurance that each participant will be treated with respect. List these in the agenda.

5. Send a draft agenda. Allow participants plenty of time to suggest agenda additions such as sub-topics. This will restrict participants from bringing up last-minute, unrelated matters.

6. Start on time. Regardless of who is missing, start the meeting at its scheduled time. When late-comers join, do not repeat what was missed. They can read the minutes or talk with someone afterward about missed details. A colleague once started a meeting even though nobody had arrived. When the first person arrived ten minutes late, he started ten minutes into the agenda. Until everyone becomes accustomed to the process, you may want to start meetings with items not tied to company productivity or effectiveness.

7. Give all participants a voice. Watch for non-verbal queues from the quiet participants. They often have an opinion, but are not comfortable interrupting the extroverts.

8. Go around the room. If everyone has the opportunity to give an update, make sure everyone stays on track and understands their limited amount of speaking time.

9. Sum it up. When concluding the meeting, review topics covered, and describe any action items, responsibilities and deadlines. Sometimes so much is discussed in meetings, accountabilities are missed. Use this time to review ground rules for future meetings.

10. End on-time. If you have not discussed everything on the agenda, continue the meeting only if everyone is free. Agree upon a new end-time. Otherwise, schedule a follow up. In either case, make a note of why the meeting didn't stay on schedule and correct it for the next meeting.

A unique meeting technique is the "stand-up" meeting where the group gathers in a room without chairs. This certainly expedites the discussion, but it can be difficult for participants to take notes, without using a wall or a colleague's back. You could also find everyone sitting on the floor if you lose control of a long-winded participant.

What do you do if you are a regular participant in unproductive meetings, but not the facilitator? See a future issue for ideas!