

■ 7 Steps to Painless, Productive Meetings

by Tom Terez

Did you attend a meeting today? Do you have more meetings coming up? If so, welcome to the club. People spend an average of nine hours each week in meetings, according to a survey conducted by BetterWorkplaceNow.com. That's 468 hours a year – and who knows how many aspirins.

Because they take so much of our time, meetings are a huge opportunity for improvement. A few smart changes can produce sessions that get more done more quickly and cause fewer headaches for everyone. Here are seven practical action steps:

1. If the meeting has no clear purpose, don't have it. It's amazing how many meetings are held because they've always been held. The biggest culprits are those "same day, same time" sessions that people have carved into their calendars. For every meeting, try to come up with a compelling statement that describes the purpose, and identify at least one intended outcome. If nothing worthwhile seems to surface, the same will happen during the session.

2. Take the agenda seriously, but not too seriously. There are times when digressions are worthwhile and when certain issues should move up in priority. It's a judgment call every time, but sometimes that buttoned-up agenda has to go out the window.

3. Don't use meetings to rubber-stamp decisions. Let's face it, some managers bring people together and try to feign a group decision when they've already "pre-decided" the outcome. People come equipped with powerful BS indicators, so this kind of group manipulation rarely works. If you simply want to communicate information, save everyone's time and opt for internal mail or e-mail.

4. Strive for meaningful dialogue. When six people are around a meeting table, it's like having six supercomputers at the ready. In fact,

people are far better than supercomputers because they also have hearts. Instead of "leading" the meeting, facilitate the session. Instead of making statements, ask questions. Instead of raising objections, ask more questions.

5. Be your own constructive critic.

Are you talking too much? (With five people at a meeting, it takes a darn good reason to talk more than 20 percent of the time.) Are you holding back? (If so, don't whine if your ideas never get a fair hearing.) Are you listening to understand, or are you simply gathering enough info to frame your counterpoint? What would you say about you if you were sitting across the table from yourself? If you can't be objective or honest with these questions, ask a friend who attends the same meetings.

6. Wrap up each meeting with a group evaluation. With everyone weighing in, decide what went right during the session, what could've gone better, and what should be done differently the next time around. Commit to one or two practical improvements.

7. Cut down on those meeting minutes. An hour-long meeting should yield a page or two of notes at the most, and these should be circulated no more than two days after the meeting. Use them to keep track of major discussion points, decisions, and assignments.

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