

■ Going to a Boring Meeting? Take this Column!

by Tom Terez

I had big plans for this column. I was going to write about an exciting, engaging, energizing, enlightening, adjective-filled topic. But something happened to change all that—something that had all the pleasantness of major abdominal surgery.

I attended a meeting.

More accurately: I was imprisoned in a meeting. It lasted two painful hours, during which I became convinced that the laws of physics had somehow broken down and caused an actual stopping of time. It was that bad.

Millions of people are similarly locked down in time-wasting get-togethers each and every working day. According to a recent survey conducted by MeaningfulWorkplace.com, people spend an average of nine hours each week in meetings. That's nearly 500 hours a year—and who knows how many aspirins.

So while meetings aren't the most exciting topic, they're important because they fill up so much of our time. Even a few improvements here or there can translate into sessions that get more done more quickly and cause fewer headaches for everyone.

My recent two-hour funfest had the typical

meeting trappings: the box of donuts, the coffee, the nice conference table, the opening chit-chat about nothing in particular. I was there as a visitor to share some thoughts about employee focus groups, but it turned out that most of the meeting was filled with other agenda items.

The boss did all of the talking: providing updates, announcing decisions, sharing opinions, even letting us know when we could take our

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one and only break. He seemed to have been born 200 years too late, because he would have been a world-class colonial town crier.

That's not to say that the attendees weren't productive. Sure, in terms of overall expression, they conveyed the same level of interest typically displayed by boulders and appliances. But the person next to me created quite a nice doodle of a front yard—planning next year's landscaping, I suppose.

To cope with these wonderful memories, I am sending via this column a twofold plea. First,

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conduct a tough reality check on your current meetings. What's working, what isn't, and why?

Then do something about it. Here are seven ready-to-use ideas in case you need a nudge:

If you don't have a clear purpose for the meeting, don't have the meeting. 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.

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.

Don't use meetings to rubber-stamp decisions. Let's face it, some managers bring people to-

ply want to communicate information, save everyone's time and opt for internal mail or e-mail.

Recognize the power of dialogue, and build it into your meetings. 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.

Observe yourself. 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 information 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.

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gether and try to feign a group decision when they've already "pre-decided" the outcome. (Of course, you and I would never do this!) People come equipped with powerful B.S. indicators, so group manipulation rarely works. If you sim-

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.

Cut down on those meeting minutes. The term "minutes" is derived from the Latin *minutus*,

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which means small. So if your meeting notes go into tiniest details, blame it on the people of ancient Rome, who sat through endless meetings on rock-hard chairs and eventually watched their empire crumble. An hour-long meeting in the modern era 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 these to keep track of major discussion points, decisions, and assignments.

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