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Making Meetings Productive - Come In Prepared, Stay On Track, End On Time

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You're sitting in a meeting listening to a company big-wig prattle on. You're not sure what he's talking about - some incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo about profits and losses, mission statements and vision. The droning sounds remind you of Miss Othmar of "Peanuts" fame. You're not even sure why you're here, other than to nosh on the free cookies and soda.

Sound familiar? Across Silicon Valley, managers are subjecting their colleagues to inefficient meetings.

Roger Mosvick, a communications professor at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., estimates that companies are losing the equivalent of 30 working days a year for every person who participates in business meetings. Furthermore, half the time spent in conferences is wasted, according to Mosvick's survey of some 1,650 professional workers. The loss of time can be blamed on poor meeting preparation, ad hoc scheduling and lack of training in how to manage meetings, said Mosvick, who co-authored the book "We've Got to Start Meeting Like This!"

But like it or not, face-to-face meetings are becoming increasingly more important as companies grow into complex, multinational entities with hundreds or thousands of workers. The popularity of project teams in the workplace has led to the need for managers to meet with many groups for progress reports. In the past, the boss made decisions and simply handed down edicts to subordinates. Today, "no boss can know everything," Mosvick said, so he or she must depend on information collected and disseminated by underlings.

Unfortunately, managers have not made much headway in making meetings more efficient and effective. Mosvick's surveys show that participants complain that meetings start late, digress, lack organization and go on much too long.

So, if you want to keep your colleagues from daydreaming or falling asleep, take note of the following advice from meeting-management experts:

Decide if a meeting is really necessary.

Think twice before you call a meeting. Ask yourself if you can accomplish the same task by sending e-mail, using teleconferencing or delivering a memo instead. Sharon Morris, president of Performance Solutions, a management consulting firm in Fremont, suggests you first consider the "return on investment" of holding a meeting. In other words, is it worth the productivity lost while workers are spending time in a meeting?

Sunny Chan, a former program manager at Sun Microsystems Inc., would rather his staff of 15 engineers

use their time productively to work on projects than to waste it sitting in meetings. Although he had weekly meetings scheduled, he occasionally canceled them if he deemed them unnecessary.

"If there are no new changes, I'll send an e-mail out to update my team," Chan said.

Define the meeting's purpose and desired outcome, and write an agenda.

Decide the meeting's purpose. Will it be a brainstorming session? A call to action? A motivational meeting? For informational talks, it may be enough for participants to simply gain an understanding of the topic. For meetings called to generate action and results, you need to tell participants, in advance, that they are expected to develop a list of recommendations or make a decision.

Put together an agenda, listing specific topics, along with time estimates for each item. Schedule the important items for the beginning of the meeting because "people leave mentally before they do physically," Morris said. Distribute the agenda prior to the conference.

Invite only the necessary people.

Limit the meeting participants to those whose input is needed to accomplish the desired outcome. That includes both people who will be affected by the group's decision, as well as anyone who might significantly interfere with implementing a decision.

For brainstorming meetings, ArLyne Diamond, president of Santa Clara-based management consulting firm Diamond Associates, tends not to intermix managers with worker bees. She believes workers feel too intimidated in the presence of higher-ups to share ideas. "If you want the free flow of ideas, you probably want to be careful with how you mix the group," Diamond said.

The optimal meeting size is six or seven people, said Maureen Kelly, who designed a seminar on how to hold meetings for management consulting firm Zenger Miller in San Jose. "In bigger groups, people are less inclined to speak because they don't want to take up more than their share of time," Kelly said.

However, staff meetings that don't require input from all participants can run efficiently with more people.

Experiment with new meeting styles.

"People these days are stressed out, so if you can make a staff meeting something that people can look forward to, it helps," said Mary Miller, a career counselor in Redwood Shores.

She passes out Chinese yo-yos and kazoos at the start of her meetings. "It's a good way to get people there on time because they know I'll be giving out toys at the beginning of the meeting," Miller said.

Stand-up meetings also have become trendy in some management circles. Standing up "creates a sense of urgency," said Morris. People who slump in comfortable chairs during a meeting tend to be more relaxed and less focused.

But Mosvick regards such gimmickry as fads. "It's that kind of gimmickry that gives meeting management a bad name," Mosvick said. "They're vogueish and they don't make any sense."

Keep on time.

Determine in advance how long the meeting will last. The duration of a meeting depends on what type of conference you're holding. A meeting designed to brief a group on its project should be 20 to 30 minutes. A brainstorming meeting might last several hours. In general, most meetings shouldn't last longer than 1 1/2 hours, experts say.

Time of day is an important consideration. Meetings are best held in midmorning or midafternoon, experts say. Avoid scheduling them near arrival time, lunch time and quitting time. Lunch meetings often aren't productive because people are too busy eating to pay attention. "People have food in their mouths and are popping open sodas, spilling stuff and getting up to get things - it's very distracting," said Mark Rabkin, a manager at Apple Computer Inc. in Cupertino.

For scheduled meetings, start on time and end on time. Don't let them drag on. [Valerie Frederickson](#), president of Menlo Park-based career management firm Valerie Frederickson and Co., said she holds meetings on a full bladder - that gives her incentive to get to her point quickly.

Don't wait for stragglers. By waiting, you punish those who were respectful enough to show up on time. "You train people to be on time by being on time yourself," Diamond said.

Resist the urge to re-cap information for stragglers during the meeting. Instead, wait until the break or after the conclusion of the presentation to brief them on what has already been said.

However, if an important meeting is called at the last minute, it probably is wise to wait until all or most of the participants have arrived. "Sometimes, it's more important that people hear the message than to be taught a lesson about being on time," Diamond said.

Assign someone to be timekeeper to keep people from rambling and straying off topic. "When people know there's a timekeeper, they seem to be more aware (of what they're saying)," Miller said.

Keep participants involved and focused.

Ask open-ended questions to promote the sharing of ideas. Pick out individual participants and ask for their opinions if you feel they may have good ideas, but are too shy to voice them. That's what Rich Olivas, branch manager of Fremont Bank's Newark office, does. He says that calling on individuals makes his workers feel that their opinions are valued - and it keeps them awake during the 8:30 a.m. monthly meetings.

Susan Andre, a career counselor in San Jose, suggests that a "question tracker" be assigned. This person serves as referee and makes sure that everyone has had his or her turn to speak. The question tracker will moderate in what order people are to speak and keep track of the time.

When Diamond holds a meeting, she gives attendees stickies so that they can write down their ideas. Then she asks participants to stick the stickies on the wall and then to re-arrange them into topic groups that will be discussed during the meeting. "It enables heavy talkers to be in control and it enables shy people to have a word," Diamond said. Diamond says flipcharts are also a great way to keep people focused on the topic.

Come to some conclusions.

By the end of the meeting, you should summarize key points and accomplishments and make specific assignments. This will give participants a sense of accomplishment, a feeling that they haven't wasted their time.

"By the beginning of the meeting, we have a goal in mind, and by the end, we've accomplished that goal," Olivas said.