



Stop Wasting Your Life in Meetings

How often have you left a meeting wondering why the meeting was called and what came out of it? Meetings that are poorly run are a waste of time and a negative influence on employee morale and the bottom line. Just by multiplying an average wage by the number of people around the table the dollars add up quickly. Even at \$30.00 an hour, eight people in a non-productive meeting costs your organization almost \$500.00, and with multiple meetings taking place at any given time, one can quickly see that thousands of dollars a day can be wasted if nothing of value comes out of the meetings. Yet meetings can be very productive and an excellent way to benefit an organization by utilizing tools to maximize the human capital around the table. Some questions need to be answered to assure that meetings are worth the financial investment.

Are the right people in attendance? Very often, meetings are non-productive because the wrong people are in attendance. When calling a meeting one should decide who in the organization will be affected by the issue of discussion? It is important to have people in attendance with the relevant expertise needed to resolve the issue. Depending on the purpose of the meeting one needs to have an adequate differentiation of roles to ensure productivity and participation? Many people grumble on the way to the conference room for a meeting that took them away from the project they were working on, only to leave after a couple hours wondering why they were asked to attend. Once a person's train of thought is disrupted, it takes time to get back into the project mode and often that does not happen until some time later thus affecting the time-line of an assignment. By ensuring that the right people with a clear understanding of the meeting are asked to attend the productivity of the meeting can be enhanced.

Is the meeting necessary? Many meetings are unnecessary and the information can easily be disseminated by another modality. The Wall Street Journal reported that CEOs found meetings to be the largest category of unproductive time on their schedule. The biggest waste of time is meeting for meetings sake. If there is no reason for the meeting, why are you getting together? Often employers believe it is important to meet to keep their workforce connected, yet when meetings are unproductive the morale of the employees are affected.

Be clear about the purpose of the meeting – In addition to the right people being there, the individuals attending need to have a clear understanding of the purpose of the meeting or why they are being involved. Once it is determined that a meeting is necessary, the purpose must be clearly stated, so participants will show up prepared. Is the meeting a problem-solving session or is the intention to relay information? One way to guarantee a clear understanding of the meeting purpose is to send out a copy of the agenda in advance with the purpose of the meeting clearly stated at the top of the



page. Also, send it prior to the date in plenty of time, so participants can gather any information they will need to take part in the process and move it along. If this is a decision-making meeting, make sure the person who has authority to make the final decision will be present. Introverts often take in information and think about it before coming to a decision. By publishing the agenda prior to the meeting, you will allow these individuals time to consider the information thus creating a more synergetic collaboration.

Recorder or scribe: Every meeting should have someone willing to take notes regarding decisions made at the meeting. This individual will keep the minutes and be responsible for distributing them in a timely manner. Some groups even ask the recorder to send a reminder email a couple days prior to the meeting to make sure everyone is in attendance, and has given thought to the agenda items.

Meeting space: A meeting can be made more productive if the environment is conducive to the work that needs to be accomplished. If the person calling the meeting makes sure that the environment is appropriate and equipment is in proper working order prior to the meeting, valuable time can be saved. Many a meeting has been held up while someone tries to find the correct hook-up for a power point presentation. Also, if new participants are included, a map designating the location of the conference room will be beneficial.

Decision-making process: The group needs to determine how decisions will be made. Utilizing consensus, where individuals agree to support and work towards what the group decides although it may not be their first choice is frequently a good choice. Although it may take longer to come to a decision, time is saved by the group being on the same page. Often participants may give a nod at the meeting only to leave and undermine the decision of the group.

Facilitator: Even with all of these considerations, meetings can be nonproductive due to power plays and poor communication practices. A facilitator can level the playing field and help meetings to become more fruitful. A facilitator is an individual trained to focus on the process of the meeting and help the group to center on one item at a time. Their role is to assist the group to concentrate on a common problem and process by making sure everyone has the opportunity to participate. At the initial meeting of a group, a facilitator should explain their role and responsibility in the meeting process, and let the participants know that they will focus on how the group works together not on the subject of the meeting. By focusing on the process, the facilitator helps the group determine what information and people are needed to complete the task. Often participants want to jump to solutions prior to having all the crucial information and the facilitator can help the group from heading off in the wrong direction. By having an individual present who can keep the group on track, both time and money are saved.



Even with high tech meetings bringing participants from different locations together, a facilitator can help keep the group process on track.

A facilitator is also trained to understand the group development process and knows when to introduce tools to advance the group progress. Problem solving formats allow the group to systematically work through issues so that the whole scope of the issue is brought to awareness before resolution takes place. Other tools such as Pareto analysis, flowcharts, fishbone diagrams, constructive feedback and other techniques the facilitator is trained in encourages the group to dissect the issue in an organized manner. Knowing when and how to utilize the tools is critical to the success of the group.

At the end of the meeting, the facilitator can make sure the process continues by having the group develop the agenda for the next meeting including the names of those individuals who will be responsible for particular items, thus establishing accountability. Having the group identify important aspects of the agenda allows them to have ownership in it. This saves time and money as progress is held up if people have not followed through with their assignments. The facilitator can also help make the meetings more industrious by asking the group questions. Some sample questions include:

1. Are there any other issues the group should look at now?
2. The group has determined 4 pressing issues. Is there a logical progression with how they should be dealt?
3. Does the group agree to this progression?
4. Are there other people who should be involved in this process?
5. How is that information helpful to the problem we are currently focused on?
6. I hear people saying we are not ready to present our findings to the president, so what needs to be accomplished for that presentation to happen?

By utilizing the facilitation method, ideas are allowed to be heard, evaluated and worked on in an environment of cooperation. Is it worth the effort or should one person continue to make the decision? Collaborative decision- making results in better, more creative solutions, than individual efforts. Group members enjoy a feeling of involvement and are often motivated to support group decisions due to their involvement in the process. With many businesses merging and restructuring a facilitator can help organizations to work toward their goals without bias saving time and money. In meetings discussing important events such as strategic planning, a facilitator is worth their weight in gold!